

ALFRED

January, 1992 \$2.25 U.S./\$2.95 Can.

# HITCHCOCK's

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

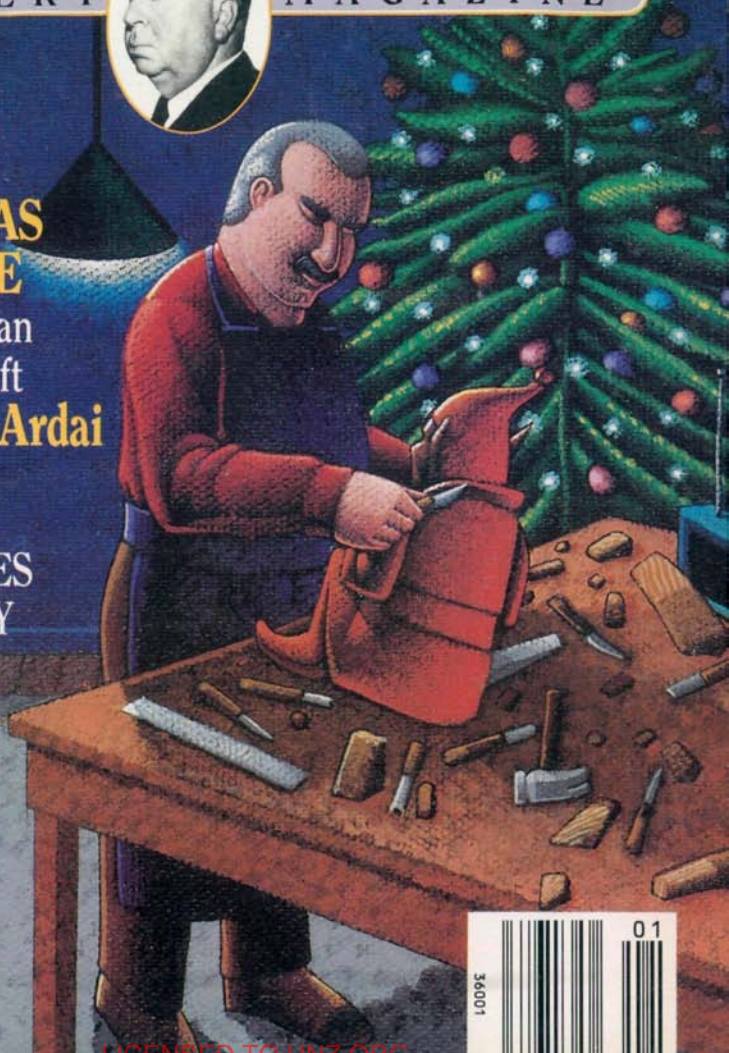


## CARMINE AND THE CHRISTMAS PRESENCE

The Story of an  
Unsettling Gift  
by Charles Ardai

AND MORE  
NEW STORIES  
OF MYSTERY  
AND  
SUSPENSE

PLUS...  
THE CAROL  
SINGERS  
by  
Josephine  
Bell



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Purrfect Crimes!

# MYSTERY CATS



**Feline Felonies by Lilian Jackson Braun,  
Ruth Rendell, Patricia Highsmith  
and Thirteen Other Modern Masters of Mystery**

Lilian Jackson Braun, best-selling author of *The Cat Who* series opens the door for this well-groomed anthology of crimes, felines, felonies, and misdemeanors. Paw through an amazing compendium of 16 stories of murder and mayhem amid kittens and catnip, featuring the genre's greatest talents selected by the finicky editors of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. \$4.99

**SIGNET**  
Penguin USA

# CONTENTS



## SHORT STORIES

<b>ALL I WAND FOR CHRISTMAS</b>	by Dan Crawford	<b>4</b>
<b>PACO'S OUT</b>	by Wayne L. Tappan	<b>11</b>
<b>SEOUL STORY</b>	by Martin Limón	<b>34</b>
<b>GOOD TIMING</b>	by Ben Town	<b>48</b>
<b>CARMINE AND THE CHRISTMAS PRESENCE</b>	by Charles Ardai	<b>64</b>
<b>PRITT THE TWIT</b>	by Anne Peverell	<b>79</b>
<b>MURDER IN THE PASSAGE</b>		
<b>VENDÔME</b>	by Erich Obermayr	<b>91</b>
<b>A BIT OF FLOTSAM</b>	by Jacklyn Butler	<b>110</b>

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

<b>THE CAROL SINGERS</b>	by Josephine Bell	<b>118</b>
--------------------------	-------------------	------------

## DEPARTMENTS

<b>EDITOR'S NOTES</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>UNSOLVED</b> by Walter Shepherd	<b>75</b>
<b>SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED"</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>BOOKED &amp; PRINTED</b> by Mary Cannon	<b>149</b>
<b>MURDER BY DIRECTION</b> by William Heller	<b>153</b>
<b>THE STORY THAT WON</b>	<b>155</b>

**ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE** Vol. 37, No. 1, January, 1992. Published every 28 days, which includes special issues in June and at year end, by Davis Publications, Inc., \$2.25 per copy in the U.S.A. \$2.95 in Canada. Annual subscription \$31.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$37.50 elsewhere (in Canada, GST is included) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10168-0035. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. © 1991 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3E1. Davis GST #R123293128. **ISSN: 0002-5224.**

Cover by Roy-Mel Cornelius

COVER BY ROY-MEL CORNELIUS  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# EDITOR'S NOTES

## *Season's Greetings from the staff of AHMM*



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

**Cathleen Jordan**, Editor; **Elana Lore**, Managing Editor; **Terri Czczko**, Art Director; **Ron Kuliner**, Associate Art Director; **Nancy Siwinski**, Junior Designer; **Carole Dixon**, Production Director; **Cynthia Manson**, Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Manager, Contracts and Permissions; **Elizabeth Beatty**, Circulation Director; **Phyllis Jessen**, Circulation Planning Director; **Christian Dorbandt**, Newsstand Marketing and Promotion Manager; **Dennis Jones**, Newsstand Operations Manager; **Veena Raghavan**, Director, Special Projects; **Irene Bozoki**, Classified Advertising Director; **Barbara Zinkhen**, Classified Advertising Manager; **Judy Dorman**, Advertising Coordinator (New York: 212-557-9100).

**Joel Davis**, President; **Joe DeFalco**, Vice President, Finance; **Mary Tzimokas**, Vice President, Circulation; **Carl Bartee**, Vice President, Manufacturing; **A. Bruce Chatterton**, Publisher.



# MYSTERY WHEN YOU WANT IT!

Six hours of the finest mysteries you'll ever hear

## A VACATION TO DIE FOR

Six passports to deadly adventure from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Stories by Lawrence Block, Mary Higgins Clark, Stanley Ellin, Edward D. Hoch, Charles Nicolò and Ruth Rendell.

2 tapes, 3 hours • \$15.95

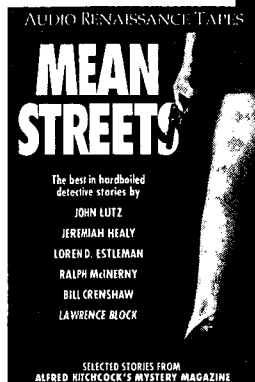
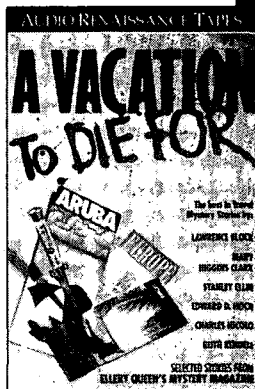
## MEAN STREETS

Hardboiled crime fiction from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Stories by Lawrence Block, Bill Crenshaw, Loren D. Estleman, John Lutz and Ralph McInerney.

2 tapes, 3 hours • \$15.95

Order both programs and save over 20%.  
4 tapes, 6 hours • ONLY \$24.95

**MYSTERY ON AUDIO — the perfect gift for your favorite mystery fan (or for yourself!)**



Qty.	Title	Price	Ext.
—	A Vacation To Die For	\$15.95	—
—	Mean Streets	\$15.95	—
—	Set of both programs	\$24.95	—
	Subtotal	—	—
	N.Y. residents add 8.25% sales tax	—	—
	Shipping and handling	—	—
	(\$2.00 for first item, .75 for each additional item)	—	—
	TOTAL	—	—

Please mail your order with a check for the total amount to:  
Dept. AR 012

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine  
380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017

Name

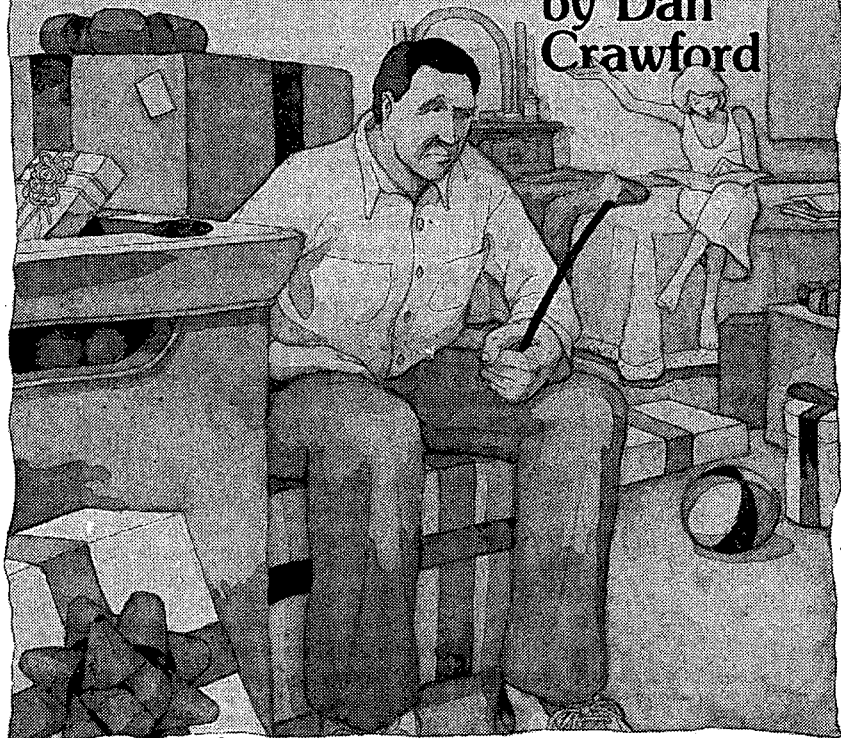
Address

City

State  ZIP

# All I Want —for Christmas

by Dan  
Crawford



“**I** have to get up! It's my job!”

Holden took her shoulders and pressed them back among the pillows. “You're on sick leave!” he shouted, as if volume could pierce the feverish blanket of delirium. “Lie down!”

Faye was unwilling but too weak to resist. She dropped back. Her husband held her there for a second and then let go, ready to spring at her again if she tried to rise.

She didn't, and he took a step back. “Okay?” he inquired.

Faye studied him through damp eyes.

"If you don't want to spend Christmas in the hospital, you have to rest," he told her. He tipped his head to one side. "Right?"

"Honey," she whispered.

He took one of her hands in both of his, as though it were fragile. "Just rest," he said.

"Honey, look in the bottom drawer of the dresser." She stopped to breathe a little, and went on, "Under the box with your letters in it."

"Why?"

Faye didn't answer. Holden shrugged and walked over to kneel before the dresser.

"Here?" he said, pulling open the drawer. He couldn't resist a peek into the box. Had he really written that many letters? The postal service ought to give some kind of service award to courting couples.

He pushed a pile of pajamas to one side so he could reach under the box. "What is it?" he called to her. "There's nothing . . ."

But there was something, way over at the side. He brought it out, an old black sun-dried stick.

"This?" he demanded, straightening up.

"Bring it here," said Faye.

"What is it?"

She put one hand up. "Bring it here."

Holden looked from the stick to his wife, shrugged again, and took the one over to the other. Faye took it in both hands and hugged it to her chest, closing her eyes.

"What is it?" Holden asked again.

Faye sighed. "Not a stick," she whispered.

Holden paused and then reached for the phone to call Dr. Willett. While his head was turned, he heard a little jingle from the bed, almost like sleighbells on a reindeer.

"Did you hear . . ." he started to say.

But now Faye held a long streak of swirling, shimmering light. Holden's mouth dropped open.

"I was . . . waiting for the right time to tell you," said Faye.

She took one hand off the rod of light. Little sparks seemed to spray off her fingers.

"What is that?" Holden whispered.

"My wand," she whispered back. "It's . . . oh, Holden, I meant to tell you!"

"Tell me what?" he demanded.

She tapped the flickering shaft with one finger, and waves of silver coursed down it. "I'm a fairy godmother," she said. "Well, a fairy godmother trainee."

Holden reached for the phone again and stopped. "Really?"

"What is this, if I'm not?" she demanded, sliding a hand along the twinkling wand.

"Well . . ." said Holden.

"I go see her every Thursday," said Faye. "Her name's Vivienne."

Holden watched as red stripes with blue sparkles slid along the shaft. "Today's Thursday," he said.

"Yes," she replied. She held up the wand. "Vivienne's my first assignment as a solo. I don't want to disappoint her."

Holden watched the wand move through the air. Little pink hearts seemed to circle the tip. "Why don't you just wave that over yourself and make yourself well?" he asked.

Faye shook her head. "I can only do things for Vivienne." She sighed again and held the wand toward him. "Here."

Holden took a step back. "What?"

"Take this. Go see Vivienne."

"Now . . . wait," he said. This was too much too fast. He tore his eyes from the mesmerizing wand and stared into his wife's face. "I'd blow it. I don't know anything about being a fairy godmother. I'm not the fairy godmother type."

"The wand does most of the work," she told him. "You just have to be there to hear the wishes." She stopped to breathe a little more. "Vivienne's . . . a little demanding, so don't let her . . . get carried away. The wand can run out of power if you try to do too much for too long."

"Is that why some spells only last until midnight?" said Holden. "What do I do if she doesn't have any pumpkins?"

Faye nodded. "It's all right. The only thing is . . . I've tried to teach her not to be so greedy. It's all this counseling that I had to train for. But you just grant her a few wishes and then come home."

Holden brought one of his hands toward the wand but didn't touch it. "Are you sure? Will you be all right while I'm gone?"

"I'll take another nap," she told him. "Here."

Holden put a thumb and forefinger on the wand. It was cool, vibrant. He felt like going out and granting wishes. "I'll try," he said. "How do I get there?"

"Just say, 'Vivienne, I'm here,' " she said.



Holden nodded. But before he tried it, he frowned. "How come I never had a fairy godmother?" he demanded.

Faye shook her head. "Honey, management isn't my department."

He nodded again, took a deep breath, and announced, "Vivienne, I'm here."

"Well, it took you long enough!"

Holden looked around and found himself surrounded by pink. Every piece of furniture that met his eye had pink ruffles on it. The wallpaper was pink, the ceiling was pink, and he couldn't see his feet for the deep carpet of pink.

"Hey, who are you?"

Holden turned toward the voice and jumped back a yard. Somehow, he had been expecting a much younger girl. Vivienne was easily seventeen or eighteen and was leaning on a massive pink bed, barely covered by the filmy gauze of an incongruously blue nightgown.

She had leapt off the bed now and was shaking a finger at him. "You're not my fairy godmother! Who are you?"

"Oh, um," said Holden. He cleared his throat. "She's got the flu pretty bad this week. I'm her stand-in."

Vivienne looked him over critically and then shrugged. "Okay," she said, and sat back on the bed. Reaching back, she hauled a pile of magazines to her side.

"Well, listen, fairy godfather, or whatever you call yourself," she said. "I don't know what it's like where you come from, but here it's three days until Christmas."

"Mm, yes," said Holden, trying to keep his eyes on the framed posters above the bed.

She brought the stack up to her lap and opened what Holden now recognized as a catalogue on the top of the pile. "So there's shopping to do. I want to get this for Dad." She flipped the pages until she reached a bookmark and pointed to a picture.

Holden knew nothing about guns, but he knew a luxury item when he saw it. "Only I want gold trim instead of silver," Vivienne went on. "And monogram it *JWM*."

"Okay," he said. He looked the wand over. Its cheerful sparkle was reassuring. "One deluxe shotgun, coming up."

He waved the wand in what seemed to him a perfectly ridiculous manner. A swirl of golden smoke floated from it, only to vanish and reveal a gold-decked shotgun sinking into the pink carpet.

Holden nodded. Not bad at all, if he did say so himself.

Vivienne was less easily pleased. "No, no, no," she said. "Gift-wrap it."

"Oh, of course," said Holden. "Sorry."

As he waved the wand again, Vivienne made a little checkmark on a list. She tossed the top catalogue back onto a pillow and opened the next one.

"Okay," she said. "Let me see. Oh, this is for Mom. Here, see? Well, come over and look! I want that dress—better make it a twenty-two, no, a twenty-four—and . . . these shoes, on this page, and, let me see, over here . . . A, C, and D. The emeralds on D. Oh, and the shoes are sevens."

"I hope the wand remembers all this," muttered Holden, waving golden smoke from the wand again. This time everything came wrapped, and Vivienne seemed to assume he'd gotten it right. She discarded this catalogue, and turned to the next.

She seemed to have all her relatives to the third degree on the list, and a dozen or so "best friends." Holden wished he could see in real life some of the creations of suede, cashmere, and sequins that she was improvising from the basic models in the catalogues. Vivienne's bedroom, large as it was, was quickly crowded with everything from a big screen television system to a quilted red satin coat to a gold watch with koala bears for numbers and boomerangs for hands. Perfume, a car CD player, and a whole video cassette library were stacked on a pool table. Holden's wrist was aching from making circles with the wand, and his sinuses had begun to seize up from all the golden smoke. And still Vivienne read down her list, making little marks.

Many of these marks were accompanied by remarks. "That's Tim," she'd say. Or, "That'll show Cindy I don't care who's runner-up." And, "Jenny will be green, just green."

This was obviously one of the most militant Christmas lists Holden had ever heard of. He wondered if he shouldn't make a push to instill a bit of true giving spirit. Or had he better leave that kind of thing to Faye?

Vivienne gave a most unchristmassy cackle while running her finger down a page in the gourmet chocolate catalogue. "Five pounds," she muttered. "She'll love it. That's why she's such a pudge."

"Um," said Holden. "Er." She looked up, and he swallowed hard. "What do you suppose they're all giving you?" he inquired.

Vivienne's chin came down as she considered that. "I don't know," she said. "You could . . . no." She shook her head firmly. "No. All I really want is to see their faces when they realize what I gave them."

This was certainly a traditional way to enjoy Christmas. But there was something in the way she said, "Ha ha!" after that that made Holden feel the spirit of giving was not foremost in her mind.

"This is for Mollie," she went on, pointing to the page. "The five pound box. With walnut centers."

"Okay," said Holden, sighing. "Um, what about charity?"

Vivienne looked up as the box of chocolates came into view on top of the motorcycle. "Charity Whitelock?" she demanded. "She's a sophomore; I hardly know her."

"No, no," said Holden. "I mean the hungry, the homeless. There are a lot of people out in the cold this Christmas, you know, um, without knowing where their next meal is coming from, and . . . and so on."

Vivienne's face was a study in impeccable boredom. "Oh," she said. She shrugged. "Well."

She looked Holden up and down, and he shrugged back at her.

"I guess you're right," she said finally, folding her hands on top of the stack of catalogues. "It is Christmas, I guess. Let's conjure up something really charitable for all the hungry, homeless people in . . . oh, in this county. I know! Something I can hand out to them. A real gift for the hungry; that'd look nice, wouldn't it. I bet I'd get the P.E.O. Award."

Holden looked around the room to see how much space there was left. Well, maybe there weren't many hungry, homeless people in this particular county. He waved the wand.

"That's it?" Vivienne demanded, as the smoke cleared.

Holden stared at the little envelope on the floor. This wand wasn't running out of power, was it? He didn't want to have to walk home, especially if he didn't know where he was.

Vivienne had set her catalogues to one side so she could collect the envelope. "That's it?" she said again, holding it out. "McDonald's gift certificates? And look! There's only one left!"

She ripped the gift certificate from its binding. Another lay underneath. "Okay, two."

She tore the second one free, and a third one appeared. Her mouth open to expose shock as well as perfect teeth, she tore out coupon after coupon. A dozen or so fluttered to the floor before she

gave up. "I guess that's not bad," she said. She looked up at Holden.

"But nothing costs fifty cents any more," she went on. "And you can only use one gift certificate per purchase. What good is that? I'd have to spend my own money."

"Aha!" said Holden, seeing his opening. "But you wanted a real gift for the hungry, didn't you?"

She wrinkled her flawless forehead at him. "Of course!"

"Well," he said, trying to think how to put it. "What kind of gift is it if you didn't pay anything for it, didn't do any work for it, and just gave it for what you could get out of giving it? You'd get your picture in the papers, maybe, if you delivered a truckload of food to the hungry and homeless, but what would you be getting the credit for if it were just stuff you had me get you? This way, you'd make a contribution of your own."

She glared at him. "Think about it," he urged. "You didn't lay out a dime for any of these presents. You just went through the catalogues and made little checkmarks and figured your fairy godmother would handle everything else. So are they gifts from you or gifts from your fairy godmother? It would be different if you didn't have a dime, but I'll bet you do."

Vivienne looked around the room, pouting. Then she shrugged one huge shrug, her shoulders bouncing nearly up to her ears.

"Oh, be that way," she snapped. "Take it all back."

Holden waved the wand in a huge circle over his head. Smoke filled the room and then cleared, leaving only the massive bedroom and its furnishings.

Vivienne studied the empty space, her face wrinkled with disgust. "Now," she said, pointing one shining fingernail at Holden, "give me unlimited credit on all my cards, and put fifty-five thousand dollars in the bank for me."

Holden took three steps back. "But . . . but . . ."

"Don't look at me like that," Vivienne ordered. "I'll still be giving something."

Holden looked unconvinced. "I will so!" she snapped. "Who do you think is going to have to fight through the mall to buy all this stuff? And just three days till Christmas, too!"

Holden sighed and waved the wand again. It was a start, anyway.



# Paco's Out

A large, vintage-style camera is the central focus of the illustration. The lens is prominent, and inside it, a man's face is visible, looking out. The camera has various dials and buttons, and the letters 'AF' are visible on its side. The background is dark and textured.

by  
Wayne  
L. Tappon

**I**t annoys the hell out of me when I pick up a ringing phone and the person on the other end won't say anything. Even a simple, "Sorry, I misdialed," would help. It makes me feel foolish standing there

like a parrot reciting, "Hello, hello," and after what seems like thirty or forty seconds, but probably isn't, you get a dial tone in your ear.

Slamming down the receiver makes me feel marginally bet-

ter till I remember the phone company made me buy the phone and they charge me to fix it if I break it.

This time something felt different. I wasn't sure why, but instead of hanging up I listened. I thought I heard breathing and, in the distance, the screech of an electric saw or maybe a grinder.

I tired of the game, muttered, "Creep!" and was starting to pull the phone away from my ear when I heard a deep-throated chuckle, and then the dial tone. The chuckle triggered an atavistic memory, and I felt the short hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stir and a surge of fear sweep through my aging bones.

Even though my conscious mind tried to deny it, some part of me knew who it was even then. The answer surfaced briefly, but I tried to force it out of my head.

It couldn't be Paco. They'd given him five to ten for aggravated assault, and it had only been a little more than two years since he'd started paying his debt to society. It didn't figure he'd get out for at least three more years, and by then, if I was still around, I'd be seventy-three years old. But what difference would that make? Paco had never shown any particular kindness to people who

happened to have celebrated more birthdays than most, and in fact he made his living mugging senior citizens for the few dollars they couldn't defend.

I hoped it wasn't Paco. I'd recovered completely from the beatings, and aside from a few assorted morning aches and twinges, I felt just fine. I could very well be around for a lot more years, and I knew I didn't want any more of Paco and his friends. After the last pounding they'd given me, it had taken months for the ribs and hip to heal, and I still had some of the scars on my face and skull. The doctors said they didn't think there was any permanent damage to my kidneys though at my age it was a little hard to tell.

I'd absorbed three brutal beatings before I'd figured a way to leave Paco and his buddies with fluorescent powder on the money they stole from me. My friend Hank and I located Paco for the police by tracking the beeper I'd planted on his car and Sergeant Perez had made the arrests.

And now Paco was in prison. So whoever had called, it couldn't have been him.

The phone rang again, and I glanced at my watch. It had only been ten minutes since the last call. I don't get many calls, and the ones I do get are mostly

someone wanting to sell me a subscription to something. I picked it up cautiously, said hello, and listened to the silence. I didn't wait for the chuckle. I hung up, but I'd lost interest in the *Reader's Digest*. I sat in my chair reconstructing the events of two years ago.

I'd not only been responsible for his arrest, but as the victim, I'd been the chief witness against Paco at his trial. Sergeant Perez had testified that the defendant had resisted arrest and seemed wholly unrepentant, and that after he and his friends were in custody the string of senior citizen robberies and beatings had stopped. The defense attorney objected, and the judge ordered the jury to disregard references to other senior citizen beatings. Perez and Paco glared at each other throughout the proceedings, and when sentence was pronounced, Paco had laughed out loud and yelled something about how sorry he was he wouldn't be seeing Perez and me for awhile. He promised to look us up when he got out.

I glanced at my watch and forced my mind back to the present. Almost half an hour since the last call and almost time for *Golden Girls*. As I reached for the remote control, the phone rang again. I said hello, and when I got nothing

but silence, I slammed the receiver down hard, hoping that if I broke my phone I'd at least break my caller's eardrum, too. All I accomplished was to smash my finger against the phone.

I sat fuming, sucking on my finger, watching the nail turn blue. I thought about taking the receiver off the hook but then scolded myself for being paranoid. It was probably just some nut with an old phone listing. After all, the apartment was new and I'd only had this number a couple of months. I turned on the TV just as my program was getting under way. Then the phone rang again.

Looking at my watch was reflex.

Whoever it was hadn't waited. It had hardly been a minute and here it was ringing again. To hell with it. I wouldn't answer. Let it ring.

I tried to watch television and couldn't. Instead I stared at the phone, and on the eighth ring, I broke, grabbed the receiver, and gave my seventy-year-old imitation of a roar.

"I don't know who the hell this is and I don't care! I just know that if you don't stop calling this number, I'm going to call the phone company and they'll . . ."

Somewhere during my tirade

I realized someone was trying to interrupt. I heard, "Hey! Hey, Mr. Graszik, hold it. Wait a minute."

I stopped yelling and listened. The voice slowed.

"Mr. Graszik? Tom Graszik? This is Lou Perez. I don't know if you remember me, but I was on the Sandoval case. You remember Paco Sandoval?"

"Yeah, sure. I remember." I hit the off switch on the remote and watched the TV screen fade to black. I was embarrassed by my outburst. "Sorry about yelling. Someone's been calling, then hanging up."

"Yeah, I gathered that. Pretty annoying." The voice settled into the slow steady rumble I remembered. It reminded me of a Caterpillar tractor. But then so did Perez. He was damn near as wide as one, and from the beginning he'd given me the feeling he was the kind who'd just keep moving forward like a bulldozer, pushing obstacles out of his way till he got what was important.

"Funny you should call just now, sergeant. I was just thinking about you." I felt a little foolish putting my fears into words so I pushed them away. "What can I do for you?"

"Thinking about me?" Behind the stolid front I could hear the instant quickening of

attention. The spark of cop interest. "What made you think about me?"

"I guess it was the phone calls." I laughed to show him I knew how foolish I was being. "I got the crazy notion that Paco was on the other end."

There was a measured silence, then a sigh. "Not so crazy. Paco's out. That's what I was calling to tell you."

"Out?" The surge of adrenaline raised my voice half an octave. "How could he be out? He's serving five to ten."

Perez sounded resigned. "He got parole. I just found out."

I tried to talk, but all that came out were strangled sounds of frustration. Perez's voice changed to apologetic. "I was off for a couple of weeks and just got back today. Paco was released three days ago, and he's back in L.A."

"How could he get parole?" I shouted. "That's crazy." I struggled to get a grip on my emotions. There was no point in yelling at Perez. He had to be at least as frustrated as I was.

"I guess he convinced the parole board he wasn't a violent person. He never had a gun, and he didn't actually stab anyone with the knife."

"Stab anyone? He damn near cut my throat!" I was sputtering like a one cylinder outboard. "They don't consider



fractured skulls and broken bones violence? Are these people on the parole board living on the same planet?"

"Yeah, I know how you feel." There was a distinct note of irony in Perez's voice. "I guess with the overcrowded conditions in the jails, they're under a lot of pressure to give an early release to the ones who've been rehabilitated."

"Oh, sure."

I thought for a moment. "So now that Paco's rehabilitated, he'd have no reason to look us up."

"I guess you already got the answer to that one tonight. Unless you believe those were really wrong numbers."

"Sure." I sighed. "How about his two buddies?"

"Miguel's already out. He got a lesser sentence but I heard he went back to Mexico. Jorge's dead. He got in a fight in the joint, and someone mashed his head. Of course, no one saw anything."

"Of course not." I wasn't feeling too sorry for Jorge. In fact I wasn't thinking about him at all. My mind was on Paco. I told Perez, "I guess he didn't have too much trouble finding my new phone number."

"Neither did I. Maybe when you moved, you should have gotten an unlisted number. There aren't many Tom Gras-

ziks in the book, you know."

"Well, if I'd known they were going to let him out..." I'd started to raise my voice again, then choked it back. I waited. Perez was probably just giving me a chance to finish the sentence, but his silence irritated me. I didn't want him feeling sorry for me. I forced my manner back into neutral. "If I see him around," I said, "I'll let you know."

Perez sounded genuinely concerned. "Look, Mr. Graszik, we both know Paco is dangerous. I can't give you twenty-four hour protection, but I'll call the watch commander at Wilshire and ask him to have the patrols keep an eye on your building. If Paco doesn't do anything threatening, we can't touch him. In the meantime, be very careful. Try not to go out alone."

That was a laugh. I hadn't even met many of my new neighbors. They were mostly younger and away at work most of the time anyway. Of course, Mrs. Gerstein, the widow who managed the building, would be only too happy to accompany me anywhere, but I'd almost rather take another beating from Paco than listen to her mindless chatter for very long. Besides, I had enough trouble just keeping her from dropping by any time day or

night with food. Twice in recent days I'd come home to find casseroles on my kitchen counter. I'd tried to explain, without hurting her feelings, that I didn't want her using her pass key to come into my apartment, but she chose to misunderstand.

"Is no problem, Mr. Graszik. I happy to help. Mildred Gerstein will see you get proper food." She looked me up and down and muttered and clucked about men with no meat on their bones. She was nice enough, but her appraising examinations of my person made me uneasy.

I told Sergeant Perez I'd be careful and thanked him. I hung up, but after a moment, I reached over and took the receiver off the hook. I needed to think, and I couldn't concentrate waiting for that damn instrument to ring.

Out of habit I turned the TV back on in time to see a series of commercials before I remembered I didn't want to watch TV anyway. I turned it off and thought about putting on a pot of coffee, but I expected I'd have enough trouble getting to sleep as it was, so I just sat and thought. After a while I put everything firmly out of my mind, checked my feeble little door locks and chain, and went to bed. I didn't have an idea in the

world what I'd do if Paco showed up. I didn't sleep real well.

With my breakfast, I browsed through the yellow pages instead of the newspaper, and by nine o'clock I was calling places that advertised medical alert gadgets. On the television commercials they make it look like all you have to do is push a button and some concerned attendant is in instant two-way communication with you, summoning an ambulance, paramedic, cop, or possibly the Red Cross. I found out the commercials are somewhat simplistic.

I ruled out some of the companies immediately because their remote devices were part of expensive home burglar alarms. I couldn't see investing a thousand dollars for the landlord's benefit. Another company featured a two way communication device you could either wear around your neck or strapped to your arm like a Dick Tracy wrist radio. Since it cost less than two hundred, I was interested till I found out you had to be within sixty feet of the control box and it might or might not work if I stepped outdoors. That would be fine if Paco made house calls and if he'd give me time to explain to some operator that I was being mugged.

I checked on cellular phones that I could carry with me around the neighborhood, but I ruled them out too for pretty much the same reasons. When Paco had caught me before, he hadn't given me any warning. I could just see myself asking him to wait a minute while I dialed 911 and explained my problem.

Besides, I didn't believe he'd be content just to rob me this time. He'd want me dead. Even if he was dumb enough to fall for the fluorescent powder again—which he wasn't—getting him back to prison wouldn't give me much satisfaction from a slab in the morgue. No, I needed some method of nailing Paco for good without getting mangled.

My only consolation was that my new apartment was only a few feet away from a busy street. I'd finally finished paying off the last of Mary's hospital and funeral expenses and found that my Social Security and small pension allowed me to live in a slightly better neighborhood. I could probably even have squeezed out small car payments, but by now I was used to buses and walking.

There were people coming and going up and down Fairfax twenty-four hours a day. I reasoned that even at three in the morning, the musicians, wait-

ers, and cops having an early breakfast at Canter's would be witnesses to any street assault. Then I tried to remember the last time I'd been out at three in the morning and laughed at myself. I had enough real problems without inventing nonexistent ones like getting mugged on Fairfax at three in the morning.

If Paco wanted to do me in at night, he'd have to come to the apartment. Not exactly a comforting thought.

I didn't expect him to show up right away. Paco wasn't intelligent, but he had a wild animal's instincts. It didn't seem likely he'd draw attention to himself by killing me immediately after being released. He'd want to get even, but he wouldn't want to get caught. Of course, this was based on the assumption that Paco was sane.

The landlord didn't want me to bolt two by fours across the doors as I had in my last apartment, so I settled for a second dead bolt lock. So far all my thinking had revolved around keeping Paco from reaching me. I hadn't come up with a thing that would put him away again. At least nothing that didn't involve fearful, if not terminal, damage to my aging bones.

I did get the phone company

to give me an unlisted number, but three days after it was installed, I got another call from Paco. This time he didn't just breathe and chuckle. This time he was downright sociable. After I said hello, I let him do all the talking.

"Hey, mon, how you been? You remember me? You moved, huh? And got a brand new phone. You must be doin' pretty good. Me, too! I even got a job." I heard the whine of the grinder in the background, but this time I knew what it was. Perez had told me Paco was working for his uncle in an auto body shop over on York Boulevard. It was a condition of parole, but the word was that he didn't spend much time hammering out dents.

A note of complaint crept into his voice. "You used to talk more, mon. You don't sound so friendly now. I bet you think I'm mad. Is that it, mon? You think I'm mad at you?" He chuckled. "Hey, I'm not mad, mon. Maybe I'll stop by and show you. Maybe we can go out, have a few drinks. Few laughs. You know, mon."

I hung up and called Perez.

Perez sounded sober. "Yeah. These ex-cons have an old boy network you can't believe. Paco probably knows someone who knows someone who has a sister with the phone company.

Changing the number again probably wouldn't help for long."

"Have you heard from him, sergeant?"

"Nope, not yet. I don't think he'd call me at the station because he probably knows his call would be recorded. He may not know where I live yet. There are a hell of a lot of guys named Luis Perez in L.A." He paused. "He might not mess with me at all, but I suspect he'll come looking for me after he feels he's settled up with you."

That didn't cheer me up, either.

The next morning I was making my usual grocery run with my little two wheel wire cart when suddenly Paco was walking alongside, grinning up at me like one of the gargoyles at Notre Dame.

"Hey, mon, long time. You lookin' real good."

He laughed at my expression. I looked over my shoulder for the cadaverous Miguel, but he wasn't in sight. At least I wouldn't have to worry about those pointed cowboy boots destroying my ribs and kidneys again.

"What do you want, Paco?" I was determined not to let him see my fear although that hadn't helped me a bit the last time.



"Want?" His laugh was as jovial and as phony as a department store Santa Claus's. "Why, I just want to say hello to an old friend. Maybe go for a little drive. You prob'ly don't get out too much. You like to go for a ride with Paco?"

The grin on his flat toad face did not extend to his eyes. I remembered those eyes. Cold and black and reptilian. He must have blinked from time to time, but I couldn't detect it. In spite of my efforts to remain calm, a chill ran up my spine. I looked past Paco and saw a black and white in the line of cars creeping slowly down Fairfax. I stepped off the curb and waved. The cop turned on his flashers, pulled over, and his partner climbed out of the passenger seat putting on his cap and adjusting his baton. He exhibited the bored courtesy of the professional patrolman.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

I glanced at Paco. He was wide-eyed and friendly and seemingly very interested in my conversation with the cop. This might not be easy. I gritted my teeth and plunged ahead.

"This man is threatening me, officer. He's assaulted me in the past and has made threats against my life."

"Me?" Paco was astounded. "I

didn't threaten no one. I just happen to see an old friend and stopped to say hello."

The officer looked at Paco with distaste, grabbed his arm, and hustled him off the curb.

"Up against the car. Spread 'em."

The driver, who looked like he might be playing hooky from high school, did the honors, patting Paco down while Paco insisted in a genial manner that this was all some kind of mistake. There were no weapons to be found. The officer, whose name was Cunningham according to his nametag, was examining Paco's driver's license.

"Your license is going to expire in a couple of weeks. Is this your current address?"

Paco explained he had a new address, that he was on parole "for good behavior" but was gainfully employed and was running an errand for his uncle. He had picked up a grille and a fender for a 1962 Jaguar from a body shop on Santa Monica Boulevard and was on his way back to the shop with his uncle's pickup when he just happened to see me and decided to say hello.

The younger officer walked Paco down the street to the parked pickup to verify his story while I tried to explain to Officer Cunningham that Paco

had been imprisoned for beating and robbing me and had threatened revenge. Cunningham listened, nodding skeptically, chewing a wad of gum while he eyed me.

"Well, sir, he seems friendly enough now. Sometimes our imaginations kind of run away with us, but we'll ask him not to bother you."

I get that a lot lately. There seems to be an assumption that if you're old enough to draw Social Security, you must be senile.

A smiling Paco reappeared with the other officer, who told Cunningham the grille and fender were in the truck and there was a receipt on the front seat.

They shoed Paco away, suggesting he stay away from this part of town. The corners of his mouth sagged, and his lower lip thrust out like a baby about to cry. "I didn't mean nothin'. I just wanted to say hello to an old friend." But when he turned his face away from the officers to look at me, he winked, then he put one finger to his pursed lips and blew me a kiss. The younger of the cops walked him to his pickup, telling him he shouldn't frighten old people because they didn't always understand.

I tried to explain to the veteran officer that Paco was dis-

turbed and dangerous, but Cunningham was only half listening. The expression on his face told me that he was used to humoring eccentric old codgers, and I got the impression that two of L.A.'s finest found Paco's performance more credible than mine.

I debated about telling Perez. I didn't want to get Cunningham and his partner in trouble. I had enough enemies. If I didn't want to live in fear the rest of my life, I'd need all the help I could get. I decided to ask Perez to have them briefed about Paco without mentioning our street encounter.

I got my groceries and went home with the glimmering of an idea. I sat down with my cup of coffee and thought about it. It wasn't a very good idea, since there was still a probability I'd get killed, but it was the best I'd come up with in three days of thinking. I called my old friend, Hank Foster. I wasn't sure whether I'd find him at his appliance store or whether he'd retired and turned it over to his son-in-law, but he answered on the first ring.

"Hank," I said, "this is Tom Graszik. How're you doing?"

"Tom! I got to thinking about you the other day and tried to call, but your number's been changed and no one answered at the new one."

"I guess I'll have to get one of those answering machines. I must miss two . . . maybe three calls a year."

Hank let that one pass. "Did you move?" he said.

"Yeah, I moved. In fact I'm a little closer than I used to be. I've got an apartment just off Fairfax."

"Let me guess." Hank pretended annoyance. "You're in trouble. You must be, 'cause the only time I hear from you is when you want me to bail you out of some mess." He laughed to show he was only kidding. I wish he had been.

"You must be clairvoyant, Hank. I do need to pick your brains a little. That guy Paco you helped me nail is out again and has been in touch. I don't think he wants to buy me dinner."

Hank's voice managed to sound sardonic and concerned at the same time. "You don't expect me to build you another beeper so you can put it on his car, do you? Can't you just call the cops and have them keep him away from you?"

I sighed. "He came right up to me on the street this morning and practically told me he plans to take me for a ride." I found myself rubbing the ribs Paco and his chums had caved in before. They no longer hurt, but the memory of pain had

flowed back unexpectedly.

"All the cops did was pat me on the head and make friends with Paco. I figure I'm going to have to build my own fences."

"You're kidding." Hank was incredulous. I could almost see the indignation on his sad, bloodhound face. "You mean you can't count on the police to do anything?"

"Well, they may arrest him after he kills me, but I was hoping I might find a way to avoid that."

Hank's voice dropped to a scolding level. "You don't sound like you're taking this too serious. What do you want from me?"

"I need to find out what you know about video cameras, and I thought I'd ask you about a beeper like we used the last time, only one with an off-on switch."

Hank groaned. "You're planning to set another trap, aren't you? You never learn. And I suppose you're going to want me to drive you all over L.A. following a stupid bug."

Hank's outburst irritated me. It was bad enough being treated like a kid by kids half my age, but since we were contemporaries, I figured Hank should be more sympathetic. I took a deep breath and swallowed my annoyance.

"To answer your questions,

yes, I am hoping to set a trap for Paco. No, I don't expect you to drive me all over L.A., and as far as never learning, I don't see that I have a hell of a lot of choices. He wants to get even in the worst way, and short of moving to Hawaii—which I can't afford—I've got to find a way to stop him before he kills me."

Hank was silent for so long I wondered if he'd nodded off. When he spoke, he sounded resigned. "When do you want to get together?"

"Well, under the circumstances, I'd say the sooner the better. Could you come by this evening? I'll pick up a couple of six-packs, and we'll rehash our hero days in the Marine Corps."

"Make it one six-pack," Hank said. "If I drink more than two beers these days, I don't sleep for a week. Around seven?"

I agreed and headed down to the corner for the beer. I looked at all the snack items in the racks and couldn't make up my mind. It had been so long since I'd entertained anyone that I didn't know what folks used for snacks. I ended up with some chips and bottled dip and found myself looking over my shoulder for Paco all the way back to the apartment.

Hank was right on time, and he'd brought his son-in-law.

They both accepted a beer, but Hank turned down my salsa dip. Said it would eat holes in his stomach. He said he'd brought Larry along because whatever I had in mind would probably involve him anyway. Larry was a large amiable guy in his forties with a neatly trimmed mustache that matched his cinnamon sandy hair. He remembered building the beeper bug we'd used last time.

They sat quietly while I explained that what I hoped to accomplish was to use the beeper to alert the police as soon as Paco showed up, and to preserve on videotape the evidence that Paco intended to kill me. Or, in the worst case scenario, that Paco *had* killed me.

Hank fussed and yelled and suggested that I move in with him and his wife until Paco got caught doing something stupid, but I flatly rejected his invitation. It took me a lot of years to get used to living with Mary, and now that she was gone, I was finally getting used to living without her. If I couldn't have Mary, I didn't want to share my space with anyone.

Larry was more practical. "Why use a buzzer? Why not just dial 911?" I explained that I might not have time if Paco broke in without knocking, so Larry said, "Why not get a bur-

glar alarm that's hooked to a central system? They can tape all your windows and put alarms on your doors." I told him I'd read an article in the *Times* about the effectiveness of alarm systems. The most common complaint was the slow response time from the police department on residential alarms.

"What I had in mind was a beeper that would only transmit when I turned it on, but the person on the other end would know that it meant only one thing. Paco is in Tom Graszik's apartment. That person would call 911 and relay an emergency message to the boys in blue."

"Who'd be on the other end?" Larry asked.

I admitted I didn't know many people in the building, but I'd hoped Mrs. Gerstein would help out. She was almost always home except on Jewish holidays when her children took her away.

Hank snorted. "What do strangers know? You're close enough to the shop and to my house so I can handle the receiver." He turned to Larry. "You can make a portable rig I can take home at night, can't you?"

Larry shrugged. "Sure. You used a portable rig in the car the last time. I can use a re-

ceiver that operates on either AC current or batteries. That way you'll never have to turn it off."

Hank turned back to me and scratched his ear. "What do you plan on doing with a video camera? You think Paco will pose while you take his picture?"

I hesitated. "I'm not sure about the camera. I sort of had in mind some way I could be filming him without his knowing it. Like, 'Smile! You're on *Candid Camera*.'"

Larry looked interested. "That would work if you had enough light in the room and if the camera were hidden good enough." He looked around my living room. "We could stick it in a corner behind a big potted plant, except you don't have a big potted plant."

"I don't have a video camera either, but if I had one, how could I hook it up?"

Larry got up and wandered around the room, thinking out loud.

"The potted plant would work, but these high bookshelves that run all the way over to the window might be best. I think I'd hide it behind some books. No one ever looks up high at books."

Hank said, "How would you ever get up there to turn it on and off?"

Larry looked at him, frown-



ing. "You couldn't. And you couldn't just leave it running because you'd go through a tape in an hour."

I felt defeated. I stared at my feet stretched out on the recliner and sighed. "So much for bright ideas. I guess the beeper will work, though."

Larry turned slowly, looking at the wall sconces, the lamps, and the floor plugs. "You'd need more light," he said. He nodded his head, and a look of satisfaction crept across his face. He went to the front door and flipped the light switch on and off. He strode to the other switch located midway between the kitchen and hall doors. He flipped it on and grinned. "It should work. You don't have an overhead light, and the wall lamps work from either switch. If we can wire up the camera to one of the wall fixtures, it'll come on when you hit either switch."

I liked it. I nodded and agreed. "It should work. How will I get more light?"

Larry said, "We can put some hundred or one hundred fifty watt bulbs in all the wall fixtures. When you turn on the lights, it'll look like a sound stage at MGM."

Hank snorted. "Or blow the circuit breakers sky high. Do you want to be alone in the dark with that freak?"

Larry cupped his chin in his hand. "Hank's got a point. It would probably be all right for a while, but I've got an electrician friend who comes in the shop who can probably install some heavier duty circuit breakers. I'll ask him, but since you don't plan to run the camera for more than a few minutes, I think your wiring will be okay."

Hank had been a skeptic for all the years I'd known him. We'd served in the Marine Corps in World War II, and he'd been positive neither of us would make it off Saipan alive. Even though we had, he just figured that shortened the odds on anything else going right. He had more objections now.

"What if he waits outside for you and doesn't come into the apartment?" I told him Paco didn't want to get caught, so it was a pretty good bet he wouldn't hit me on the street.

"But what if you're in the bedroom and he catches you asleep? You won't get a chance to turn on the lights and the camera. He can use a flashlight and still cut your throat."

I'd thought of that, too, and discounted it as a possibility. "I don't sleep as well as I used to, Hank. It's not very likely Paco can get in here when I'm home without making a racket. Someone might even call the

police before the beeper wakes you up."

Larry nodded. He looked like the kind of guy who was born to solve problems. People like Larry can fix anything and aren't really happy unless something's broken. He rubbed his hands with satisfaction as if he'd decided that now that the policy decisions were out of the way, it was time to get to the logistics.

"You don't want to buy a video camera, do you? The good ones still cost a lot. Besides, I've got this friend who's got one of the compact models. Since his divorce he never uses it."

I nodded in gratitude.

"Good!" Larry was beaming. He looked inquiringly at Hank as he spoke to me. "If Hank can watch the store for awhile tomorrow, I'll get the camera and come over and hook it up. We'll see what all's involved, but it shouldn't be too hard."

I offered them another beer, but Hank said they had to be going. He smiled as they left and squeezed my arm. "How in hell do you keep getting yourself into these messes?" he said.

By three o'clock the next day it was all in and working like a charm. The wiring for the camera was concealed behind the shelves, and you could barely see the lens behind the atlas in

the corner. Larry had played around with the focus till he was satisfied he was getting eighty percent of the room in the picture. My chair and the couch and the front door were all covered, and once someone was two feet into the room from the hall or kitchen, they could also be seen.

The beeper he'd brought looked like a small remote control device with an on-off slide switch and a tiny red light. When I pushed it to "on," the light started blinking, and in fifteen seconds Hank was on the phone telling me to turn the damn thing off. From then on the beeper was never more than a few inches from my hand. Even when I was in the shower.

Paco kept calling. The first few calls got increasingly graphic, starting off with his telling me he wanted to show me some of the new things he'd learned while he was away, then progressing to descriptions of "games" he'd invented for my pleasure. Mostly I hung up as soon as he started talking, but once I stayed on the line with my jaws clenched and my scalp crawling till he ran down. Paco's games all seemed to involve razor sharp knives, and when he hung up I found myself choking down the thick bile in my throat.

I told Sergeant Perez, who immediately installed a voice-activated tape recorder on my phone. After that the calls continued, but Paco never spoke.

"He must have some kind of electronic detection device," Larry said. "He must know when the phone is bugged." Perez and Hank agreed, but I felt Paco's predator instincts had alerted him.

After a month had gone by, I was sick to death of Paco's cat and mouse game and almost wished he'd get on with whatever he planned to do to me. I was losing weight and beginning to look my age. It wasn't all that much fun to live in fear.

Sergeant Perez dropped by frequently when he was off duty and shared a beer with me. He hadn't heard from Paco, but according to his grapevine, Paco wasn't even bothering to show up at work any more. Perez said he might call the parole officer and see about having him picked up for parole violation. We agreed that Paco was staying off the phone because he knew he could be sent back up if I produced tape recordings of his phone harassment. It was nerve-racking waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Larry came over from time to time to make sure the camera was working and that the tape

was rewound to the beginning. I'd learned to feel my way to my chair in the dark and turn on the table lamp that wasn't plugged into the switch circuit. Since I couldn't turn on the wall switches without starting the camcorder, I didn't use them at all.

Perez had nodded 'gloomily when I showed him the setup and had agreed to alert the Wilshire division that any trouble call to this address should be treated as an all-out emergency. I hoped they'd remember six weeks from now if it took Paco that long to act.

I fell into a routine, venturing out only in daylight, shopping between ten in the morning and three, and doing without if I forgot something. I was still in the habit of looking both ways before I walked out of buildings, but there was no sign of Paco. It would have been easy to believe he'd decided to leave me alone if it hadn't been for the phone calls. At least three times a week the phone would ring and there'd be that muffled silence like someone had their hand pressed against the mouthpiece. Sometimes I'd get two or three calls in the same day and then not hear from him for almost a week. But he was out there, and he wanted me to know it.

The nights were the worst. I got in the habit of sitting in front of the TV with my beeper in my hand until two or three in the morning so I'd be close to the light switch if he broke in. It finally occurred to me that Paco might find it strange to walk into a lighted room and have the occupant get up and turn on more bright lights. After that I started going to bed after the ten o'clock news. At least if I heard him breaking in, I'd have an excuse to go into the living room and start the camera.

Then one afternoon about two when I was returning from shopping, I noticed Mrs. Gerstein's door ajar. She'd do that sometimes when she wanted an excuse to intercept me. She'd listen for me, then rush out and invite me in. I'd refuse, explaining how busy I was, but she'd keep me standing by the stairs for ten or fifteen minutes, telling me how much I reminded her of her dear departed Howard.

I tiptoed past her door and lifted the cart silently to carry it up the stairs. I held my breath till I got to my door and unlocked it. As it opened, the aroma of chicken soup came wafting into the hall.

Good Lord! Mrs. Gerstein had let herself into my apartment again. I'd asked her not

to do that. I pushed the door open and stepped in. All the lights were blazing, and Mrs. Gerstein was sitting in my chair staring at me.

This was too much! The woman had to be told off. I had opened my mouth to ask her why in hell she felt she could walk into my apartment any time of day or night when I noticed the kettle lying on its side on the floor. The chicken soup smell was coming from the large puddle soaking into the carpet.

My attention shot back to Mrs. Gerstein. Her mouth was slightly open, and the unblinking eyes had an accusing look, to them. I saw the red stain then, under her ample bosom. It was spreading over the purple and white flowers of her print dress in a nightmarish psychedelic pattern. Then the door slammed behind me, and my hand jumped toward the pocket with the beeper.

"Hold it!" My hand froze in midair. "Be careful what you reach for, mon." I felt the point of the knife pricking the skin at the nape of my neck.

"You carrying a gun now, mon? That cop give you a gun?"

I felt a hand reach around and grope at my waistband and down to my pockets. Paco paused when he felt the shape of the beeper. He reached in

and drew it out with finger and thumb.

"What you got here?" His tone was jovial. "Another little toy?" He walked forward where I could see his obscene smile. He held the beeper in his left hand and a wicked switchblade in the right. "What happens if I push the little button, mon? Someone supposed to come help you? Cops maybe?" The thought amused him. "Maybe the army or the Marines charge in and shoot Paco?"

You'd think that after my last beatings I would have learned to keep my big mouth shut, but maybe the sight of Mrs. Gerstein sprawled in my chair made me a little crazy.

"No, I don't think it would take the Marines to take a punk like you out, Paco." In spite of my best efforts, there was a quiver in my voice. "Any high school kid of average size should be able to do it."

This delighted him. He threw back his head and roared. I wondered if he was alone. There was no sound in the apartment but the quiet hum of the refrigerator motor. I hoped his buddy, Miguel, had decided Paco was too crazy to run with.

"You like to try it, mon?" He held his hand palm up gripping the knife lightly, making small circles in the air. I turned to face him, and he sank into his

knife fighter's crouch, eyes glittering with hate and anticipation. His left hand reached over and laid the beeper on the end table. I had to decide whether it was carelessness or a trap.

"Throw the knife away and try me. Hell, I'm seventy years old. You need a knife to handle old men and old women?" He'd stopped laughing and joking.

"You gonna die now, old mon."

I measured the distance to the beeper. It was still six feet away. Even if I reached it, pushed the switch, and Hank was right next to a phone, help could never arrive in time. Besides, we'd always envisioned Paco arriving at night. If I triggered the beeper, Hank would probably call to see what was wrong with it. I watched Paco's eyes and took another step forward. This time he didn't retreat.

The tip of the knife undulated back and forth like the head of a cobra. I flashed back to the judo instructor in boot camp who'd tried to teach us Marine recruits how to stay alive in hand to hand combat during World War II. His voice rang out from my memory banks.

"I can teach you how to take a knife away from a man who's trying to stab down at your chest. I can teach you how to



take a knife away if he's trying to stab up at your stomach. But if you see a guy waving a knife back and forth in a slashing motion, your best defense is to run like hell."

There was no place to run. I hadn't been too good at judo even when I was in my twenties. Now, with no strength and no reflexes . . . I wished I hadn't made the dumb joke about the video camera's helping to catch my murderer.

"I think about you in that cell, mon." The voice was quiet and deadly. "I think I'd like to cut you up some before I kill you. You got lots of things you won't be needing no more. Maybe Paco'll cut them off and show them to you." He started to circle to his left, the knife tip making figure eights in the air.

"You like to see your ears, mon? Or your nose?" Paco cackled. "Maybe some other stuff?" He circled and began to close in. I wasn't really close enough to make a grab for the beeper, but what the hell? If I waited any longer, I wouldn't have any fingers left to grab it with.

I dived for the beeper, almost losing my balance as I stretched out, but Paco had the reflexes of a cat. With the flat of the knife he swept the beeper off the table and sent it crashing into the wall across the

room; then in what seemed like the same motion he swiped the blade of the knife across the back of my hand. I jerked back as the thin line of red spread immediately into a welling fountain of blood.

Lord knows I've seen blood before. I've even seen some of mine that I left on the beach at Saipan, but the shock dizzied me, and as I straightened, I grabbed the table lamp for support. Grabbed it and jerked it toward me. It was a good solid brass lamp with a heavy base—a weapon of sorts if I could rid it of the accessories. I jerked the cord out of the wall and raised the lamp to shoulder level as I backed away.

Paco laughed as he watched my blood flowing onto the floor. The lamp shade was in my way, but while Paco was enjoying the sight of the little red fountain on my hand ruining my clothes and the carpet, I had time to reach up with my left hand and unscrew the cap that held the shade in place.

I threw the shade at him, which amused him even more. He caught the shade on the bloody point of his knife and playfully tossed it over his shoulder. A flicker of something caught my eye, and I glanced at the beeper lying in the corner. The little red light was blinking. When he'd

slammed it against the wall, Paco had unintentionally summoned help.

Fat lot of good that would do me. His eyes had narrowed, and I could see his clenched teeth through the lips drawn back in a cruel grimace. Paco had decided it was time to quit fooling around. He followed the probing knife blade, feet moving in a cautious shuffle. I backed away, lamp poised aloft like a baseball bat, but I was running out of room. When he crept into range, I took a mighty swing at his head. The lamp made a satisfying swish but hit nothing. Paco had anticipated my move and had skipped lightly out of range.

It gave me time to pull the lamp back into striking position, but I could see the wheels going around in Paco's head. I knew that if I made another full swing, he'd step inside before I could recover and bury the knife in my ribs. He started edging closer. Both of us were breathing hard, and I still felt a little light-headed. I hoped it was adrenaline and not loss of blood.

I waited for his move. I figured his first thrust would either be a slash at my arms or a feint to my unprotected midsection. It was the feint. As he lunged forward like a fencer, I pretended to start another gi-

ant swing with the lamp. Paco leaned back as the lamp swept toward him, then lunged as it passed.

But I'd stopped the lamp halfway and now, with all my remaining strength, crashed it down on his forearm. Paco screamed with rage and pain as the knife clattered to the floor, then stared in wonder at the tattoo of the snarling black panther on his forearm. A fragment of bone protruded from the cat's mouth, and blackish blood began to seep from the wound.

Then all hell broke loose. I know I had reason to be a little edgy, but I must have jumped a foot when my front door came crashing in and cops came pouring through with drawn guns. Sergeant Perez had never looked better to me. His gaze swept through the room, taking in the reproachful expression on Mrs. Gerstein's face, the puddles of chicken soup and blood, the knife lying on the floor, and Paco nursing his broken arm. He shook his head.

"You always want to do everything your way, Graszik, but you sure believe in cutting it close."

"I believe in cutting it close?" I tried to sound indignant, but I was almost too tired. "Where the hell were you?" My voice was shaky, and I realized I'd

better sit down before I fell down.

Paco began screeching at the top of his voice. "He did it! He stabbed the old lady! I saw him do it, mon. I tried to stop him and he hit me." His eyes circled the room, moving from one cynical cop expression to the next. They finally stopped when they met the cold black eyes of Sergeant Luis Perez. Paco's eyes fell. "I think he broke my arm. I need a doctor, mon."

Sergeant Perez snapped orders to the uniforms for ambulances, homicide teams, coroners, then helped one of the patrolmen rig a tourniquet on my arm.

While I was waiting for the ambulance, I had a few moments with Perez.

"Was your tape machine running?" he said.

I nodded. "Yeah, the lights were on when I got home. Mrs. Gerstein must have turned them on when she brought me the soup. Apparently she let him in and got killed for it."

Suddenly my throat filled up and I had trouble swallowing. My eyes began to sting, and Perez graciously got busy looking the other way. He had one of the young cops climb up and get the camcorder, patch it onto my TV, and rewind the tape.

There wasn't a sound in the room, even from Paco, as the vi-

cious obscenity unfolded. My TV showed a humming Mrs. Gerstein walking toward the kitchen with the kettle in her hand when the knock came. She went back to the door, opened it, and, after a garbled explanation we couldn't quite hear, stepped aside to let Paco in.

"He should be home in a few minutes," she told him. "He'll be glad to see a friend from his old neighborhood."

That's all she had time to say before Paco thrust the knife up and into her heart. Her final sound was more of a squeak than a shriek as she toppled backwards into my chair.

We watched a few minutes of Paco wandering through my apartment examining my meager belongings, then saw him scurry over to hide behind the door as I entered. The tape was still running when the ambulance attendants arrived, and soon I was too busy getting my hand bandaged to watch my own performance.

They insisted on putting me on a stretcher and wouldn't even let me walk to the ambulance. Perez stopped them at the door.

"The tape should be all we'll need. You'll never have to worry about Paco again."

"Yeah." I peered up at him. "Unless some judge rules that

the tape is inadmissible because I didn't have Paco's permission to photograph him."

Perez's face was bleak and unsmiling. I'd touched a nerve. As he turned away, I stuck out my good hand and plucked at his sleeve.

"I've got a question. What were you doing here? This isn't even your jurisdiction. And how did you get here so fast? That beeper couldn't have been on more than a couple of minutes."

Perez nodded. "We're just getting the call from your beeper now. They relayed the message to me a couple of minutes ago. We'd have been way too late if I hadn't had a tail on him. Paco lives in my jurisdiction, and he's a suspect in some new muggings. We've had two men following him since the day you saw him on the street. When he headed in to this neighborhood, they called me and waited till I got here."

"They almost waited too long," I said.

Perez nodded soberly. "They didn't think they had probable cause to break into your apartment, and they knew I'd skin them alive if they messed up the arrest. When I got here, it

sounded like a fight so we came in."

Perez's wide brown face staring down at me reminded me of the stone Aztec faces you see on buildings in Mexico. He said, "You know I could have had him picked up for parole violation a month ago, but if I had, he'd have come looking for you again in two or three years." He kept his best poker expression as he added, "I figured we'd better nail him good while you were still young enough and tough enough to take him."

I couldn't help grinning. "Thanks a lot, sergeant. I hope you don't need any more favors in the near future."

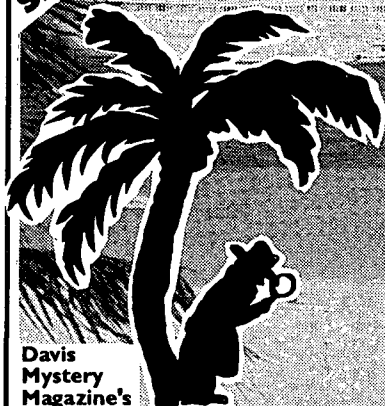
The stretcher guys started to push me out the door, but I stopped them again. I twisted around to look back at Perez.

"One more question. Paco's pretty smart. He'd have figured you were watching him. How come he didn't spot the tail?"

Perez nodded. "You're right. We didn't want him to know he was being followed, so my guys didn't try to stay too close. I used a little trick I learned from you." There was the barest hint of a smile in the corners of his mouth. "I planted a beeper on his car," he said.

**4th  
SMASH YEAR!**

*"The Game's Afoot, Mon!"*



Davis  
Mystery  
Magazine's

**MYSTERY CRUISE '92**  
**May 3 to May 10, 1992**  
**Aboard Norwegian Cruise Line's**  
**M.V. STARWARD**

Sailing from San Juan, P.R. to these exotic ports-of-call:  
**BARBADOS, MARTINIQUE, ST. MAARTEN,**  
**ANTIGUA AND ST. THOMAS.**

Prices for Mystery Cruise include round-trip air and start at  
**\$1145**

per person, double occupancy from most major cities. There is limited availability in some cabin categories. First come, first served.

**BOOK EARLY • SPACE IS LIMITED**  
**PAYMENT PLAN IS AVAILABLE**

Enjoy The Very Best Luxury Cruising PLUS: AN ON-BOARD MYSTERY CREATED JUST FOR MYSTERY CRUISE PARTICIPANTS, MYSTERY GAMES AND CONTESTS, PRIVATE PARTIES, PRIZES, SURPRISE GIFTS. GUEST AUTHORS EDWARD D. HOCH AND JOHN LUTZ.

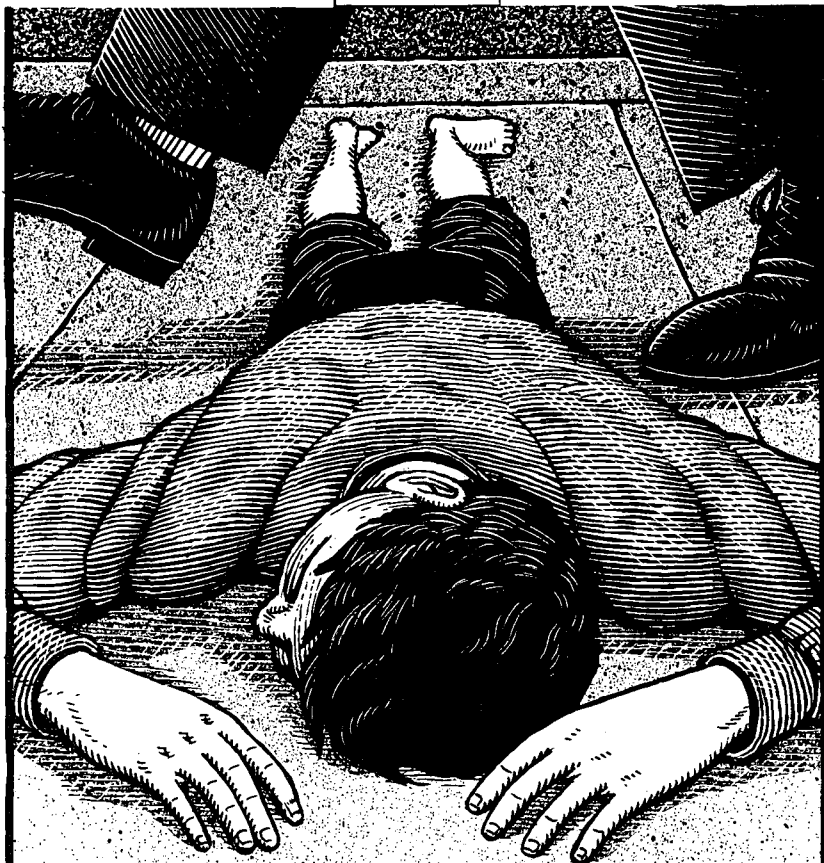
To be part of this fabulous week and to receive all the special amenities, you must book your cruise through:

**OMNI GROUP CRUISES, INC.**

6513 Hollywood Blvd., Suite 205, Hollywood, CA 90028

Write or call for more information (800) 876-6664

FICTION



# —Seoul Story—

by Martin Limón

KRO



**T**he early morning Seoul traffic swept us along like a rushing river of metal. Ernie managed to pull over, and we got out of the jeep. The boy was still there.

"Looks like he fell from a ten story building," Ernie said.

This would have been plausible except that there was nothing around but a shrub-filled lot and a long sidewalk leading to the intersection between the district of Itaewon and the 8th United States Army headquarters on Yongsan Compound.

Bare feet stuck out of ragged cuffs, and the boy's pullover sweater was as soiled and greasy as his skin. A crusty, transparent film oozed out of his tightly shut eyes, and blood bubbled and caked on his puffy, cracked lips.

Ernie knelt down and felt for a pulse.

"He's alive," he said.

We tossed him in the back seat of the jeep. He weighed nothing. Ernie revved up the engine, let out the clutch, and bulled his way into the traffic.

"Now that we got him," he said, "what the hell are we going to do with him?"

"Feed him," I said. "Get him cleaned up. And then find out how he ended up face down on the pavement of Seoul."

\* \* \*

**M**y name is George Sueño, agent for the Criminal Investigation Division of the 8th United States Army in the Republic of Korea. My rank is classified, but to give you a hint, my paycheck is paltry. Which is okay because here in Korea it goes a long way. It's been a couple of decades since this country was plowed from one end to the other by civil war, and they're still trying to shake off the effects.

My partner, Ernie Bascom, has been in the army a little longer than I have, and after his bunker in Chu Lai, he considers duty in Korea strictly primo. He's right. We haven't stopped partying since we got here. Except every now and then, when work interferes.

I've got a room on the compound, but in the early morning you'll most often find me walking back from Itaewon, the nightclub district the Korean government has set aside for GI's. It's a long walk, but usually I'm too numb to feel it. Rats scurry out of the way, stacks of drained OB beer bottles sway in the cold wind, and zombie-like Americans head for the warmth and comfort of military barracks. Normally I shower, shave, slip into the suit and tie required of all CID agents, and stumble over to the

8th Army snack bar for a cup of coffee and a copy of the daily *Stars & Stripes*. But today, on the way in, I almost stepped on something: a boy lying face down on the pavement.

Korea may not have a whole lot of excess wealth, but you don't see too many beggars. Most of the panhandlers are kids, and they're healthy and full of spunk, put up to it by some Oriental Fagin lurking in the alleyways.

So to see a boy like this, passed out, drenched in grime, his dirty cheek scrunched up against the cold cement—it wasn't an everyday occurrence.

I'd heard about the people in New York who just walk around someone in trouble. In East L.A., where I come from, we aren't exactly known for our neighborliness, either. But I always figured that if I ran into a helpless waif I would stop, see if I could help.

Except I was on the last empty stretch of sidewalk that led to the compound, and there were no other pedestrians, and if I stopped to help the boy, what would I do for him? Back in Itaewon you can catch a cab without too much problem, but no driver ventures out on this long empty stretch unless he already has a fare, and you can bet he's not going to stop for some six foot four American

with a filthy urchin draped over his shoulder. If I carried him to the compound, I'd get hassled at the gate. All guests have to be signed in and their Korean National I.D. card numbers entered on the MP's sign-in roster.

All these complications flashed through my mind in the few seconds it took to stride towards the body lying on the cold cement.

As I said, I had always thought of myself as the exception—the guy who would leap out of the crowd to assist the woman needing deliverance from a rapist. But when I imagined myself trudging down a road on a bustling Seoul morning with a lifeless mendicant draped over my shoulder, I just stepped over him, lengthened my stride, and plowed ahead toward the compound.

By the time I changed clothes and met Ernie at the snack bar, regret had overcome me. I described the situation. He gulped the last of his coffee, got up, and said, "Let's go." I followed him out to his jeep. When we got back to the long empty stretch of sidewalk, the boy was still there.

I was relieved. A chance for redemption.

We took him back to the barracks, and under the pulsing

warm water in the shower room, he came to. He was frightened at first but then realized that he was no longer cold and he was getting a bath, so he accepted the soap from my hands and in short order had himself pretty well cleaned up. After he dried off, Ernie gave him some of his underwear, which was very baggy on the boy but at least was clean and helped him resemble a human being more than he had all morning. Back in the room he wolfed down a can of beans and made quick work of the soda. Ernie got out of the vending machine down the hall.

After a brief chat in Korean I told him to lie down and get some rest and we'd be back to see him after work. Mr. Yim, the houseboy, wasn't too keen on the idea of having this stranger lurking about his wing of the barracks, but the boy went to sleep immediately. Anyway, he didn't have any clothes, since we had thrown his rags away—after I had determined that he was indeed as poor as he seemed.

On the way back to the CID detachment headquarters I was filled with that warm glow a good deed can give you; but I was puzzled about what the boy had told me. About his aunt, the one who had been murdered.

We were late for work, and the first sergeant didn't particularly want to hear that we were helping a boy passed out on the sidewalk.

"You guys got a job to do here," he said. "There are agencies to take care of orphans. I want you to contact one of them and get him turned over today, but first you got some black-market arrests you owe me."

We hadn't busted as many people as we should have in the last couple of weeks, and the provost marshal had been embarrassed when he'd briefed the commanding general.

"Who's got their finger in the dike, colonel?" the CG asked. "Or are we allowing the whole country to be flooded with scotch whisky and American cigarettes?"

Actually, it wasn't the damage the blackmarketing did to the Korean economy that bothered him, it was the Korean wives of GI's shopping in the commissary and getting in his wife's way. That's what bothered him. And the hell he caught when he got home.

The first sergeant told us he wanted three arrests, minimum, before the close of business today. No sweat. We got hot and had two of them before noon. Then we took the rest of the day off.

No sense spoiling him.

The St. Francis orphanage was an austere little cluster of shoeboxlike buildings. It reminded me a lot of boot camp except that it was filled with smiling faces bursting with happiness. Father Art was a burly man with thick forearms, a pug nose, and a bald spot shaped like a heart atop his head.

"This must be the little fellow you called about," he said.

"Yes, sir." The boy was dressed in the smallest set of gym clothes we could find in the PX. "We got him here as soon as we could get off work."

Father Art knelt down and spoke in rapid Korean. Soon the boy was nodding to Father Art and had taken his hand. They spoke for almost ten minutes, and at times I thought the boy was going to cry. I could follow most of the conversation, but a little of it was beyond me. Father Art's mastery of the language, to me, seemed as good as any Korean's.

Father Art stood up and looked at us.

"Did you follow any of that?"

"A little."

"He says that his aunt was murdered, after he'd only been living with her for about two weeks. Prior to that he had lived with his father, a tenant

farmer out in the country near Anyang. When his father died, he inherited his life's savings: two hundred thousand won and a gold watch, an heirloom from his grandfather. He wrapped it all up and tied it around his waist and then took the train to Seoul to live with his aunt. Family ties are not just important to Koreans, they are virtually sacred."

"What happened to the boy's mother?"

"She died in childbirth, having him. The boy's name is Yun Chil-bok. His aunt's name is Ahn Chong-ai."

"And he says she was murdered?"

"Yes. She owned a *pochang ma-chā*, a food and liquor vending cart, in downtown Seoul. In Myongdong. Do you know it?"

Ernie and I looked at each other. "Yeah. We know it."

It was the biggest nightclub district in Seoul. GI's mostly stayed down in their own little set-aside, Itaewon, near the 8th Army headquarters, but some of the more adventurous amongst us prowled the streets of Myongdong from time to time.

I knelt down and asked the boy to tell me where his aunt set up her *pochang ma-chā* each night. He said it was always in the same place, in Myongdong near the Oriental

Brewery Draft Beer Hall. Myongdong is a big district. I asked him to narrow it down a little more, but the best he could do was to tell us that it was about a five minute walk from the Cosmos department store.

The boy said that he had helped his aunt in preparing the food, serving the customers, and replacing the perforated charcoal briquette that fired the little stove. At night they slept under the draped cart, on wooden boards, or when it got particularly cold, and his aunt could afford it, they stayed in the common room of a *yoinsuk*, a Korean inn.

"Did you have any friends or relatives in the area?"

"No relatives, but everyone who came into her *pochang macha* was her friend."

"How old was your aunt?"

"Very old. Maybe thirty."

"Did she have a boyfriend?"

"Maybe. One man used to come around and bother her all the time. She would be very upset after he left. I'm not sure why."

"What was his name?"

"Cruncher Chong."

"Cruncher?"

"Yes."

"Why did they call him that?"

"Because he was always chewing on something."

"What happened to your aunt?"

"One morning I woke up, only the board beneath me. The cart was gone, and so was my aunt."

"Somebody had rolled the cart away while you slept?"

The boy hung his head. "Yes."

"And your aunt was gone?"

"Yes. I checked with everyone in the neighborhood, but no one had seen her leave and no one knew where she had gone. I waited there five days. Finally I was just too hungry, and I wandered off."

"How long did you roam around Seoul until we found you?"

"I'm not sure. Two or three weeks."

"What makes you so sure that your aunt was murdered?"

"She wouldn't have given up her cart without a fight, and I know she wouldn't have allowed us to be separated, for any reason, unless she was dead."

"What happened to your two hundred thousand won?"

"She had it. I gave it to her when I arrived, as my father had told me to."

"And the gold watch?"

"Yes. And the gold watch."

We thanked Father Art and left a package of goodies from the PX that we hoped the kids could use: soap, powdered milk,

cookies. Then we said goodbye to Yun Chil-bok. I told him to listen to Father Art and we'd return to visit him this week-end. He thrust his shoulders back and looked me straight in the eye.

"You are policemen," he said. "Will you find out who killed my aunt?"

"We will talk to the Korean police about it," I said.

"But I don't know them. I only know you."

Ernie shuffled his feet. He often surprised me with how much Korean he could understand.

"We'll look into it for you," I said.

"I will be waiting."

As we climbed into Ernie's jeep, I looked back at the boy. Father Art held his hand, but Yun Chil-bok stared straight at us, as if he were trying to evaluate our trustworthiness.

He didn't seem very grateful for what we had done. But maybe he felt that at the age of eight years he had a right to be picked up off the pavement and fed and taken care of.

I agreed with him. And I think his aunt had a right to her life, too.

**L**ieutenant Pei, liaison officer for the Korean National Police at the 8th Army provost marshal's

office, didn't hold out much hope.

"I spoke to the captain of the Myongdong Police Box. He said that the woman who ran the *pochang ma-cha* in the area you describe has indeed disappeared, and her cart along with her. But there's no reason to believe that she was murdered. If she had an unwanted nephew on her hands, maybe she decided that just packing up and leaving would be the best for all concerned. After all, he did end up in an orphanage."

"But the boy says she was murdered."

"We have no reports of any killings in the Myongdong area in many months. The captain was insistent on that."

We thanked him and walked out of his office. Ernie surprised me by bringing up the subject first.

"We haven't been to Myongdong in a while. Wouldn't hurt to stop by the OB Beer Hall tonight and have a few wet ones."

I looked at him. "You're right about that. It couldn't hurt nothing. Nothing but our livers."

The OB Beer Hall hummed with customers, most of them Korean businessmen just off work, standing at the counters chatting with their friends. Blue suited girls with jet black



hair tied snugly under white bandanas ran back and forth to the tap, refilling huge mugs of beer. The hefty young girl behind the stick wore a red and white nameplate with the OB Beer logo pinned above her breast.

After our second refill I spoke to her in Korean.

"Miss Kim, do you ever get a customer in here known as Cruncher Chong?"

"Cruncher? Oh, yes. He comes in here often."

"Is he here now?"

The young lady scanned the room with her almond eyes.

"No. I haven't seen him. You know him?"

"No, not yet. But we're looking for him on behalf of a boy named Yun Chil-bok."

The girl looked at us blankly. "Well, if Cruncher Chong is not here; he is usually at the Black Dragon nightclub."

"Where's that?"

She pointed. "Two blocks down and turn right past the Teahouse of the Seven Virtues."

Two more uniformed young women popped through swinging doors carrying freshly washed mugs and more snacks to put on display. Ernie stared at them, and for a moment I thought he was going to drool. Over the mugs or the girls, I wasn't sure which. I said thank

you to Miss Kim and pulled him out of there.

The Black Dragon nightclub had a long bar with upholstered bar stools and cocktail tables peeking out from behind planters and aquariums full of tropical fish. When our eyes adjusted, I saw that the joint was only about half full. The crowd was younger than at the OB Beer Hall. And full of hustle.

A tall, slender man with a heavily greased pompadour stood at the bar. He was talking, and the bow-tied bartender kept smiling and nodding his head. He stared at us when we walked in, as most of the people in the place did, and then he reached in his pocket and pulled out something long and gnarled. He stuck the tip of it into his mouth. At first I thought it was a carrot, but as my eyes refocused I realized it was a piece of ginseng root.

They say that true ginseng grows only in the soil of the Korean peninsula. It has been known since ancient times for its medicinal powers, but most men saw it as an aphrodisiac.

As I passed him, I could almost see my reflection in his big white teeth. I fought off the urge to say "What's up, doc?"

Only Ernie would have gotten it anyway.

We took a seat at a table, and

after a while a heavily made-up waitress in a tightly wrapped dress came over to serve us. We ordered two beers and a plate of dried cuttlefish. When she delivered the wets, Ernie smiled and got her to promise to come back and talk after taking care of a few more orders.

The tall man at the bar continued to drink, but I didn't see him forking over any money. Four more sleazy types paraded into the Black Dragon and joined him. They laughed at his jokes and backed off when he playfully poked them with his ginseng root.

When the waitress came back, we found out that her name was Miss Min and that she had been working there for six months. When we asked her if she had a boyfriend, she just laughed.

"Do you know Cruncher Chong?" I said.

Her head turned involuntarily towards the bar.

"Oh, yes. Everyone knows him."

"Is he a gangster?"

She dropped her head slightly and shook it so her short, curly black hair bounced and shimmered.

"I don't know."

"Did you know Ahn Chong-ai, the woman who owned the *pochang ma-cha* on the street here?"

"No. I don't know her."

Her smile had disappeared. She picked up her cocktail tray. "I must go now."

Ernie grabbed her by the wrist. "Don't speak to anyone about our conversation," he said. I translated what he said to Korean. She glared at us and left.

I took a sip of my beer. "We're not making many friends tonight."

"Not yet," Ernie said.

We ate all the cuttlefish and nursed our beers until they were just suds. Cruncher Chong and his cronies, waving and making much noise, said their goodbyes, and paraded out the door.

We paid our bill. It was about twice as expensive as in Itaewon.

The tail was easy. They weren't expecting to be followed, especially by a couple of foreigners.

Seven or eight customers sat around the cart on wooden stools. Steam billowed from a vat of soup, and the reddened faces of the revelers glistened in the glare of the naked bulb overhead.

Cruncher Chong and his buddies monopolized the attention of both the customers and the rotund woman who poured

shots of *soju* into small round cups. The men toasted the company and then drank heartily of the potent rice liquor.

The crowds of Myongdong streamed past the little *po-chang ma-cha*. Blue and white canvas flaps were draped over iron ribs, protecting the customers from the elements and the curious stares of passersby.

"If this is the cart that belonged to the boy's aunt," Ernie said, "they only moved it about ten blocks."

"Enough to confuse an eighty-year-old who'd never been in the city before."

We waited around the corner until Cruncher Chong and his buddies got up and left. Then we joined the revelers at the open-air cart. There were three Korean men and two women, all middle-aged working class people who were surprised to see us. We ordered a couple of shots of *soju*, and the proprietress threw in some unhusked peanuts, gratis, in honor of our being the first foreigners to be seen in these parts.

On the pole next to me I noticed a red document. A license of some sort, or a health inspection certificate. I stood up halfway to get a look. I couldn't read all the officialese, but I could make out that the current owner's last name was Chong. The beginning date of

the certificate was two weeks ago. The certificate was in a plastic holder, and there was something else behind it. I flipped it forward and saw the name Ahn Chong-ai.

The revelers called to me. Everyone had raised their cups. To friendship between Korea and America. I joined in.

A thick-bladed hatchet sat on the cutting board next to the kettle of soup. I asked the round, smiling woman if I could take a good look at her cart, since I was an American and we didn't have such things where I came from. Her face crinkled into a huge round smile, and she nodded her head. Behind where she stood was a double panel in the side of the cart. The interior was hollow for carrying the big kettle and the cooking utensils and the canvas cover when the cart was wheeled away on its oversized bicycle wheels. I rubbed the bottom of the wood. It was splintery, not smooth, and a dark red stain spread across more than half of the flat board.

I figured I could climb inside the cart and no one would know I was there.

I stood up and flamboyantly told the crowd how cleverly the cart was arranged and how resourceful were the Korean people. They cheered, and we all drank a little more *soju*.

I sat back down and watched

the woman hack a helpless turnip to smithereens and dump it in the boiling cauldron.

The Myongdong night was in full swing now, and the streets were bustling with people on their way to restaurants or bars or just gawking at the sights. We headed back to the Black Dragon.

"You just don't dispose of the body of a grown woman in this part of Seoul," Ernie said, "without somebody's noticing."

"The boy said Cruncher Chong had spent some nights with his aunt," I said. "Maybe he took care of her while they were alone and then got rid of the body."

"How?"

"The cart. It's the perfect hearse for transporting a stiff through town."

"And then he had the nerve to reopen the cart for business under his own name?"

"Maybe he forced her to sign a bill of sale or something."

"Or bribed the government inspector into not checking too close."

"Maybe."

"And maybe we've been drinking too much *soju*," Ernie said.

I couldn't argue with that.

We had just turned down an alley, to cut from one main street to another, when I heard

the footsteps behind us. I swiveled on the balls of my feet.

Cruncher Chong. And two of his boys.

The light from the other end of the alley faded. I glanced backwards. Three more guys were behind us. We took a couple of steps towards Chong.

"You have been following us," he said. "And asking questions."

The streets of L.A. had taught me that there is only one real advantage in a fight—the first strike. I kept walking towards Chong, casually, as if I were going to join in the conversation. When I got close, I hopped forward and snapped a kick into his groin. He doubled over, and I slammed his partner in the face and kept moving, past them, down the alley. Ernie was right behind me, but one of the guys grabbed him. I swiveled and kicked him in the side and he let go long enough for Ernie to break free and then we were running.

Once we got on the main street it was a breathless three blocks until we found a policeman. He pointed us towards the Myongdong Police Box.

Lieutenant Lee, night commander of the Myongdong Police Box, was somewhat skeptical of our explanation of a

murder that had taken place in the middle of his precinct. But we were Americans, and CID agents, so he brought a couple of uniformed patrolmen with him and followed us to Cruncher Chong's *pochang macha*.

We showed him the recent change of certificate, and he nodded and lifted out the old certificate behind it. He showed me that the deed had been legally transferred, with both a beginning and ending date for the ownership of Miss Ahn Chong-ai.

As I was about to take him around behind the cart, the rotund woman pulled a bloody, newspaper-wrapped piece of meat, that must have just been delivered, from beneath her cart. She sliced off a piece, pulverized it, and dropped it into the cauldron. Pork. She re-wrapped the large chunk and put it back down inside the cart. When Lieutenant Lee and I looked into the base of the cart, fresh blood had been added to the stain I had seen before.

Lieutenant Lee's jaws bulged as he stared at me, trying to figure what to do with us. Finally he spoke.

"What you say about Cruncher Chong carting this Miss Ahn's body off in the cart is, of course, possible. The evi-

dence, however, is slim as yet. We will locate Cruncher Chong and have a talk with him."

I nodded and thanked him.

Ernie's lips were clamped tight and his head rotated slightly on his neck, as if it sat atop a greased ball bearing.

A couple of dumb Americans, meddling where we shouldn't. I was starting to worry that Cruncher Chong might bring assault charges. Against us.

After about thirty minutes Lieutenant Lee walked out of the back room, tugging off his fingerless leather glove.

"Cruncher Chong has confessed to everything," he said.

He shrugged his shoulders, loosening them up. A sheen of perspiration glistened atop his high brown forehead.

"And we know where to find Miss Ahn Chong-ai. Tomorrow morning I will take you there."

We met him at the compound and followed his police sedan in our army jeep. It was a crisp, bright blue morning. After we left the outskirts of Seoul I breathed deeply of the clean air and had no doubt about why the ancients had called Korea the Land of the Morning Calm.

Suwon is a small town in the country, surrounded by green rice paddies and groves of apple trees. It has little of the hustle

and bustle of Seoul. Lieutenant Lee's driver asked directions one time and after a couple of turns parked in front of the Paris Beauty Shop.

There wasn't much family resemblance, but of the three beauticians on duty it was easy to figure out who was Miss Ahn Chong-ai. When she saw the big Americans and the uniformed Korean police lieutenant, her eyes grew as big as two hairdryers.

**A** couple of days later I called Father Art, and Ernie and I drove out to the orphanage.

Miss Ahn had sold her cart and Chil-bok's gold watch to her boyfriend, Cruncher Chong. That, along with the two hundred thousand won she stole from the boy, had allowed her to invest in the business of her dreams, a little beauty shop in Suwon. She was single, and maybe she thought an eight-year-old boy tagging along would hurt her chances for marriage, or maybe she just didn't deem family ties to be as sacred as most Koreans did.

I thought of Father Art's words when I explained the situation to him over the phone. "The greatest shame," he said, "that could scar a Korean's soul

is not honoring their family."

Lieutenant Lee's treatment of her had not been gentle. If she'd robbed a bank, instead of abandoning her only nephew, he probably wouldn't have been so offended.

When Miss Ahn sold the shop and refunded the money, Lieutenant Lee turned the proceeds over to the KNP Liaison Office at the 8th Army provost marshal's office. It was all in one Korean bank note totalling four hundred sixty-five thousand won, made out to Yun Chil-bok. I signed the receipt for it, and we went to the orphanage.

Father Art and Chil-bok were waiting for us. I knelt down and gave him the envelope.

"What of my aunt?" he said.

I patted him on the shoulder. "Keep her memory well," I said.

"And the man who killed her?"

I thought of the hardness in Lieutenant Lee's eyes as he glowered at the petty criminal, Cruncher Chong.

"He will be punished," I said, "many times over before his life is through."

"Thank you," the little boy said, "for restoring the honor of my family." Then he bowed.





# Give a gift of **ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE**

Why give knick-knacks for Christmas when for a stocking stuffer of a price, you can give your friends spine-tingling mystery, suspense and intrigue. Delivered throughout the coming year in the pages of **Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine**.

Once-a-year holiday rates are now in effect. The first subscription to **Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine** costs only **\$20.95** for 15 issues. Each additional subscription costs even less—just **\$16.95** for 15 issues.

And you can complete your **Ellery Queen** gift giving in a matter of minutes. Just fill out the form below or if you prefer, call us with your order **toll free: 1-800-333-3053**

Gift subscriptions received by December 1st will start at the holiday season. Orders that arrive subsequently will begin with the current issue. Greeting cards will be sent to announce your gift.

**Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine** is also available at these holiday rates. The first subscription costs only **\$20.95** for 15 issues, each additional subscription is only **\$16.95** for 15 issues.

**Mail To:**  
**Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine**  
**P.O. Box 7052**  
**Red Oak, Iowa 51591**

☐ Payment Enclosed

check desired title(s)

Ellery Queen ☐ Alfred Hitchcock ☐

☐ Bill me

**Gift For:**

**Bill To:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

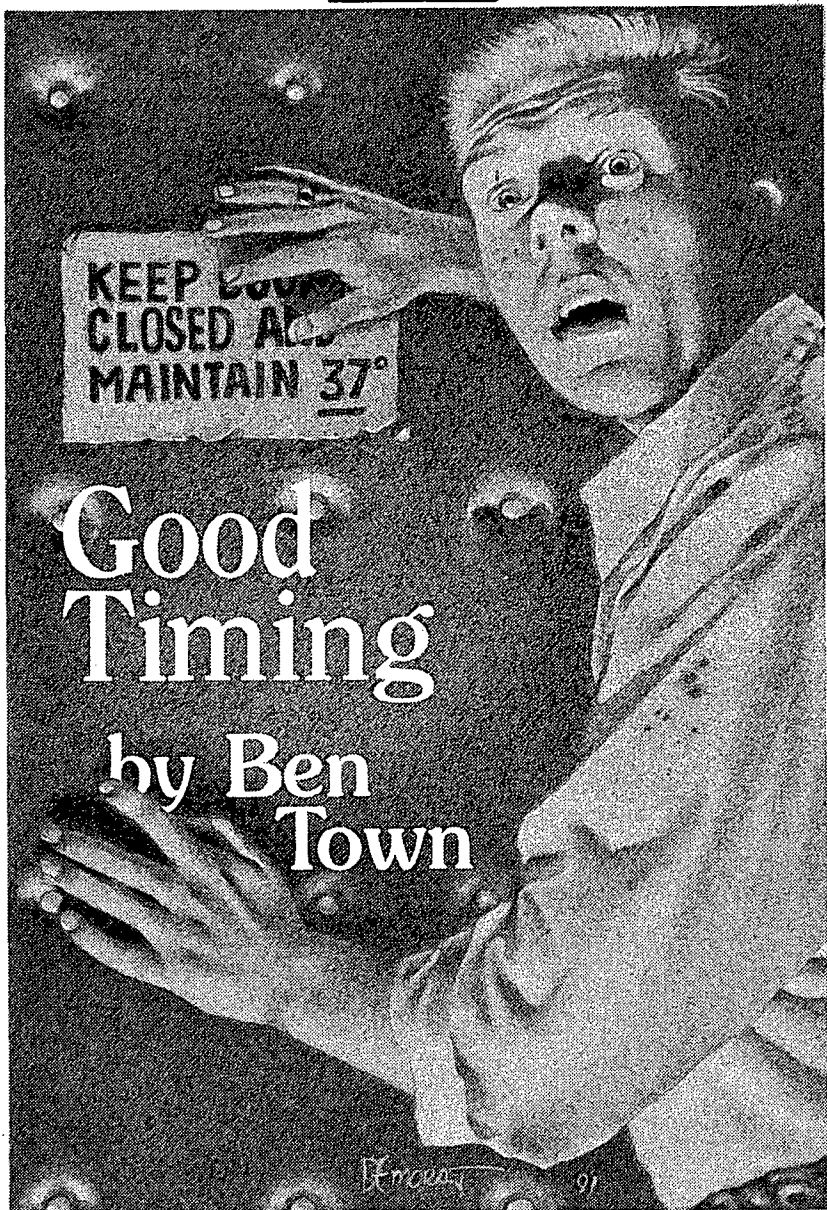
Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_



# Good Timing

by Ben  
Town

**Y**oung Matthew Ladd did not stretch for the ceiling Monday morning. He awoke late and didn't think he had the time. He hadn't had the time for three weeks, and the stretching was gradually losing its significance as a habit. When he was younger, he stretched every morning, extending his arms above his head and straining to touch the ceiling, reaching for fifteen minutes or more, aching to feel his tendons, his bones, his ligaments lengthen, increasing his height an inch or two: he was a realist and would not hope for more. Occasionally he could sense it happening and then he would reach all the more fervently, encouraging his body like a trainer—"Go, go, grow, you." On those mornings he would collapse on the bed, exhausted from the intensity of his effort and desire, convinced that when he stood, the ceiling would be all the more near. It never was, and over the years he more often felt at the end of a stretch the waning of belief rather than any expansion of cells.

At seventeen, he was five feet five inches tall and had begun to reconcile himself to the dreary, genetic fact that growth for him had ended.

Twenty minutes ago, Matt had seen the yellow school bus

pass by his bedroom window. Law would be there to pick him up any minute. He took his government textbook from the dresser where it had sat neglected all night and went into the living room to wait for him. It was dark, the drapes still drawn. Stretched on the couch with his mouth open and breathing like an obscene phone caller was Matt's father. He was still dressed, and the remote control was on his chest, close to his heart.

Matt sat down in a chair, his head back and eyes closed. He hated this time of morning. The air was foggy with yesterday—the cigarette smoke, the cooking odors, the body sweats. And waiting as he was for the day to get under way was horrible. He much preferred to scramble around and move right on out to Law's car, to school, all in a river's motion. This waiting in silence, sitting in space caught between time, was a killer, it put him to sleep.

He was almost there when he heard Law honk. As he went out he said, "I'm going, Dad."

A cool April morning, the sun drinking up the moisture in the grass, the pavement darkened and damp from a light rain during the night, the houses around quiet and drowsy. Matt breathed the new

air, and the freshness of it reawakened him. He jogged down the drive to Law's car idling in the street.

"Hey," they said to each other.

The rusted old car smelled of oil and gasoline. A spring strained through a rip in the upholstery, and the roof sagged in the middle. Law never dusted the dashboard; finger marks and scribbled words scarred through the dust as if through sand.

They drove towards Main, away from the sun, and it came through the rear window, warming their necks.

Law took a drink of Pepsi and wedged the bottle back between his legs. He was a thin, lanky boy with straight blond hair that fell into his eyes; his face was long and blotched pink with acne; on his upper lip was the wispy shadow of a mustache that he had been growing for two years.

"You working today?" asked Law.

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Noon to eight," said Matt.

"That guy's got you working every day. What's his deal? Doesn't he know you got friends and stuff?"

"He's cool. I like him."

"He's weird," said Law.

"He's not."

"That one day I stopped by to see you? You were out delivering something, and he came out from that room at the back of the store and he was whistling 'Danny Boy.' He looked at me and kept right on whistling. So I asked if you were there, and he's still whistling, right, and he just shakes his head and walks back into that room back there. Never said a word to me, man. Just whistled. Freaked me out. I could hear him still whistling when I left. And so I ain't stopping by to see you no more, okay?" Law drank from the Pepsi bottle.

Matt shrugged. "That's just his sense of humor," he said. "He was just playing with you."

"Yeah, well, that's weird."

Law turned into the school parking lot. Yellow buses lined the curb like giant bees. Law found an empty space.

"A bunch of us are going out to the mall tonight. You up to it?"

"Maybe," Matt said. He opened the door, stuck a leg out.

"What if I said Hope was gonna be there?"

"She is?" Matt's voice rose.

"I said what if I *said* she was gonna be there."

"Man."

"Hey, you never know." Law finished the pop, rolled the bottle under the seat. "How about

you cut work and we drive down to Toledo, go to Buttons?"

"Can't," said Matt.

"Come on, why not?"

"Ned needs me."

"So, what, man, is this gonna be just another day?"

"Looks like it," Matt said, standing up out of the car. "Just an ordinary weekday." He slammed the door and headed off across the parking lot. Looking back he saw Law resting his head on the steering wheel.

"I hate Mondays," his friend screamed. "Mondays suck!"

The Flowerchild and Greenhouse was set back nearly a half mile from U.S. 21, and because of this it received little walk-in business. Its gravel drive shot straight off U.S. 21 to a small parking circle, like a lake road to a secluded cottage. The greenhouse was behind the shop, long and reflecting like a history, closed in by boundary-marking trees and uncleared fields.

Ned was the florist and owner, and he was comfortable with this seclusion, preferring to work with his flowers and tend to his plants than deal too directly with people. The florist had seen enough days of drama and death, was content to work quietly a half mile or so retired from the highway. It didn't

matter that he was just forty-six; age has nothing to do with timing.

To get to the flower shop from school, Matt hiked through fields and crossed a stream bridged with tree branches and rotting boards. This Monday, coming across the uncultivated fields, books in hand, he thought of what Jeremy Davis had told him that morning in American government. He wondered why Ned had never made mention of it. But then, Ned wasn't one to talk much about anything. Matt had worked at the flower shop for two months but still knew little of the man's past. Ned wasn't secretive or elusive, more quiet and reserved, and Matt had discovered himself emulating the florist's reticent nature. They didn't talk a whole lot.

Matt wanted to talk today, though. Throughout the walk to the shop he had tried to figure a way to bring up what Jeremy Davis had said. He had to ask about it without sounding like a silly awed child.

By the time he entered the rear door of the shop, he hadn't come across one good idea and was uneasy with how to proceed. He was afraid it would be awkward.

It was.

Green metal shelves rose to



the ceiling along the cement block walls of the back room, arranged with vases and ceramic containers and long boxes of plastic or dried flowers, boxes of oasis, of colorful ribbon (narrow and wide), of floral wire and floral tape, of wooden picks and cardholders, of cans of spray paint, of boxed holiday decorations on the top shelves. The bottom shelves were cluttered with potting soil, terra cotta pots, and dead, drying plants Ned still had a desperate hope for (he never gave up on dying plants). The large grey cooler squatted on the far side, its motor knocking over regularly, vibrating the shelving unit beside it; stacked atop the cooler were more dusty boxes that Ned had probably not brought down in a decade.

From the high ceiling hung wicker baskets and bunches of drying flowers, thick red and rusted brown, the colors of autumn. Like snow off a roof's edge, flakes of the withering flowers fluttered down on Ned and Matt whenever anything heavy was dropped.

Next to the bare bathroom in the corner was the deep, wide sink, crowded beneath with green flower buckets. And next to the sink was the coffee maker, stained and chipped, mugs overturned beside it.

In that back room Matt could

see Ned as a reclusive alchemist, and at times he liked to imagine he was a sorcerer's apprentice.

The boy sat on the stool across the designing table from Ned, drinking coffee and waiting for the florist to complete the arrangement he was to deliver to St. Joe's. He watched Ned's hands and long fingers move patiently, without awkwardness, snapping the stems of flowers or green ferns to the desired length and poking them into the soaked green oasis with apparently little consideration of placement or overall design. Matt was mildly surprised and intrigued that an arrangement of beauty and order and balance emerged from such haphazardness, but he had yet to see a piece that did not and so supposed there must be some blueprint in Ned's mind from which he worked. In fact, just the day before, Matt had watched him put together twenty centerpieces for a banquet, each identical to the last and not one created in the same way, each arrangement receiving its own process of development.

Matt stood at the coffee maker and poured himself a second cup, stirring in sugar, thinking: How do I do this?

"Ned—I heard you were in Nam." He said it without turn-



ing around from the coffee table, stirring his coffee.

"I was in Vietnam, yeah," said Ned.

Matt placed the spoon on some toweling and faced Ned. "Heard you did pretty good over there. I mean, got some medals and everything."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Huh. That's something."

"Guess. Where'd you hear all this?"

"I d'know. School, other places."

"Hmm."

"Do you think you could bring those medals in sometime? I'd like to see them."

"Can't. Sold them a few years back."

Matt went to the design table. "You're kidding."

"Nope," said Ned. "Sold them to some collector at a flea market."

"I can't believe it."

Ned shrugged.

"You really *sold* them."

"Really did. Didn't bring all that much, either."

"Well, why'd you sell them?"

"Needed the money."

"Man, they were worth a lot more than money, I think. I mean, what about what you did for them?"

"That was luck." Ned had not stopped working on the hospital arrangement, and it was taking form quickly.

"Luck?"

"Sure," said the florist. "If I'da done what I did at some other time or at another place, with everything else exactly the same, who knows? Maybe I get killed, maybe it's stupid and they jump all over me, maybe, maybe, maybe. I just got lucky is all and did it at the right time in the right place, and everyone thought it was courageous. But it wasn't courageous. It was good timing, that's all."

"Still," said Matt, leaning back, "I'da kept them."

Ned stopped working and removed a silver chain from around his neck. "Wanna know what I kept? This." He tossed the chain onto the table. A quarter-sized gnarled piece of metal clunked amid cut stems, potting soil, leaves, and petals. "That's the only metal I kept."

Matt picked it up and looked at it.

"Is this real?"

"Oh, yeah, it's real. Damn thing near killed me. Except for the surgeon's scalpel and my mother it's probably the one thing's come closest to my heart."

Matt almost wanted to ask if he could have it, it was so cool, but he handed the chain and bit of shrapnel back to Ned. "You kept this instead of your medals?"

"Yep." Ned held it up and turned it, eyeing it. "I kept it," he said, putting the chain around his neck, "to remind me I can beat it." He dropped the shrapnel inside his shirt and tapped the arrangement's container.

"This piece here is ready to go."

It was a couple of hours later that the sleigh bells dangling from the front door jingled. Ned asked Matt to take care of the customer. He usually did, and Matt didn't mind working with the public.

When he went out front, his heart settled in his stomach. It was Hope. She was a tall, dark girl, with thick brown hair that fell around her face so when she looked at you it was often with upturned brown eyes that shyly peeped out from under her hair as though she had a secret. Or she might caress her hair back on top of her head and look at you forthrightly, tangling her fingers in it to keep it clear of her face. It was her hair that Matt loved most. In the English class he had with her, he sat in the rear and covertly watched her and the way her fresh, clean hair wove over her shoulders and down her back. He dreamed about her and of rescuing her from terrorists or brigands. Only his

friend Law knew of his passion, though. He had never spoken with her.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi." Matt did not move from behind the counter.

"I need a flower."

"Well," said Matt, "you came to the right place. A florist, I mean. I mean, we sell flowers." He wished he could think and talk at the same time. "How's *Don Quixote* going?"

"What?" She didn't know what he was talking about.

"Uh, the book, *Don Quixote*. I'm in your English class."

"You are?"

"Yeah. I sit in the back."

"Oh. I guess I've never seen you." She was sweet about it.

"Yeah, well, what do you need?"

To further devastate him, she had come for a boutonniere for the junior-senior banquet. He wanted to ask who was taking her, but he didn't want to know. A boutonniere is a small simple thing, and he promised her it would be ready that evening for her to pick up. As she left, she wished him luck on the English paper. He wished her luck, too, but it was a flat wish.

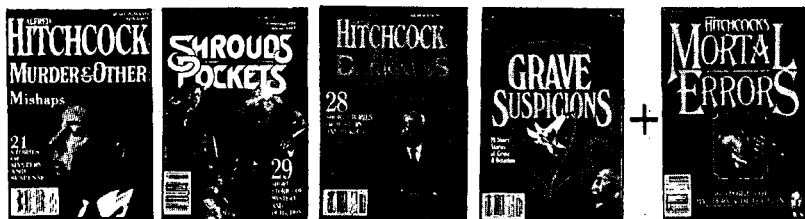
In the back room, Ned looked up from his work. "You'll never forget her," he said, a soft smile on his mouth.

"Who?" asked Matt.

"That girl."

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S 35th ANNIVERSARY SALE!

**FREE  
BOOK!**



**4 BOOKS ONLY \$9.95  
PLUS GET A FIFTH BOOK FREE!**

For only \$9.95 plus postage and handling, you will receive 4 Alfred Hitchcock classic anthologies of your choice. **PLUS**, you'll receive a fifth book **FREE!** Celebrate our anniversary with savings!

Please send my 4 books, plus  
my 5th freebook, that I've  
indicated at right.  
(\$9.95 plus \$3.00 postage & handling)  
Send to:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ St \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Mail check or money order (no cod's) to:  
Davis Publications, Inc.  
P.O. Box 40  
Vernon, NJ 07462

- ☐ #27 Murder and Other Mishaps
- ☐ #26 Shrouds and Pockets
- ☐ #25 Most Wanted
- ☐ #24 The Shadow of Silence
- ☐ #23 A Brief Darkness
- ☐ #22 A Mystery by the Tale
- ☐ #21 Words of Prey
- ☐ #19 Grave Suspicions
- ☐ #18 Crimewatch
- ☐ #17 Mortal Errors
- ☐ #16 A Choice of Evils
- ☐ #15 Borrowers of the Night
- ☐ #13 Deathreach
- ☐ #12 Fear

MAGH-0

Allow 6-8 weeks for delivery (outside US add \$6.00).

"She doesn't even know who I am," said Matt.

"I know. That's what'll make it so sweet. It's the ones who never knew you existed that you'll never forget."

"That doesn't make sense," said Matt.

"Not now," agreed Ned.

Roger was a big man, built thick. He wore silver-shaded sunglasses and a red bandanna wrapped around his right wrist. A chain secured his long leather wallet to his jeans' belt loop. Like wild tangled brush, a black-streaked-with-grey beard and mustache hid his lower face. Matt thought he was a nice guy, a guy who seemed to know a little of everything because he'd done a little of everything. He came every day to sell Ned flowers and plants, usually staying for a cup of coffee. Today he brought Ned the casket of roses the florist had ordered on Friday.

"There you go," he said, settling the Styrofoam casket on the work table. "A hundred dozen roses. You sure you're gonna be able to use all these?"

"Yep," said Ned. "I've got funeral work. People like roses for funerals."

"I guess," said Roger. "That's a lot of roses, though, man." He left as soon as Ned had written

him a check, not having time for coffee, he said.

The box of roses was shaped like a midget's coffin. Its lid fitted neatly and securely, lifting off approximately a third of the way down. Each time Matt saw one he thought there must be something he could do with it once it had been emptied of roses, but nothing ever occurred to him, except how nicely his little brother would fit into it.

The roses needed to be placed in buckets of water as soon as possible, and Matt set to it. He brought green buckets from the small storage space and filled them in the sink with warm tap water. He propped the cooler door open with a three foot long two by four, and began. Leaving the heads of yellow, pink, white, and red roses wrapped in the clear plastic, he cut at an angle a quarter inch off the stems, and put them in the water. Thorns stabbed him repeatedly. Bits of stem flew off in crazy directions, at his eyes, when he sliced them. The knife passed through the stems and sliced his thumb. Already, after only two months, he had a florist's thumb, thick-skinned and scarred with long black cuts.

After filling and carrying into the cooler nine buckets, Matt lifted another bunch of roses. "What's this?" he said.

Ned looked up. "What's what?"

"This."

Matt set the flowers aside and reached into the casket to remove a small clear bag of white powder.

Ned came over and took the bag. "Oh, hell," he said. "Christ." He hefted the bag as if it were a decision he was weighing. "This is bad news."

"Is it what I think it is?"

"It ain't sugar. I think we'd better call the cops," he said.

Just then the back door opened and Roger walked in. He started to smile, but his eyes went to the bag Ned held and he said, "Oh, man, I'm sorry."

"These ain't my roses," said Ned. He dropped the bag back into the casket.

Roger came to them. "No, man, they sure ain't. I was just coming back to tell ya and I was hopin' you hadn't opened it yet. I can't believe I did something so stupid, man. I am really sorry."

"Yeah," said Ned. "Yeah, I'm sorry, too."

Matt watched Ned, the line of his mouth, the wideness of his eyes. The two men seemed to know more than they were saying. Their voices, while calm, crackled with regret. Neither man had moved. They stood across from each other for

what felt like several minutes.

Finally, Ned said, "Well, why don't you take this casket back, bring in the one that's mine, and we'll fill this one with bunches from it. Will that work?" He didn't sound like he believed it would.

"I wish that could work."

"Me, too." Ned looked over at Matt and gave him a small, reassuring smile. The boy was unsure what was happening.

From the small of his back Roger removed a gun. "This ain't what I want to do, man, I swear."

"Yeah," said Ned. "I know. The kid, too?"

Matt felt his stomach twist. Roger was going to kill them. It was odd because he couldn't imagine himself dead.

"Ain't no other way," said Roger.

"Ned," said Matt, moving towards him, wanting to ask what it was all about, what was so out of everyone's control that Roger felt he had to shoot them. He didn't understand it.

Ned held up a hand. "It's all right. Just got to work something out is all."

"If there was any other way, man, but I gotta look out for myself—and it ain't the cops I'm afraid of. You know what I'm talking about."

Matt didn't. It seemed everything taking place was guided

by rules with which he was unfamiliar. He felt young and naive, and he despised himself for it.

"Somebody will hear it, Roger," said Ned. "Better to tie us up—"

Roger shook his head. "No one'll hear, man. You're too far back from the road. I gotta do it this way. I'm sorry, really."

The door jangled as someone entered the shop. Ned and Roger looked at each other.

"Someone's gonna hafta go out there," said Ned.

"Yeah." Roger reached for Matt, took him by the shoulder, and turned him around. The boy felt a round pressure at the base of his neck. "You go out there, Ned," said Roger. "But if you do anythin' stupid, things'll get really messed up, you know what I'm sayin'?" Ned nodded. "Okay." Roger guided Matt towards the doorway to the front of the shop. Ned walked slowly ahead of them. Roger stopped just to the right of the opening. He whispered, "If you do this right, Ned, we might be able to work somethin' out, okay?"

"Right."

Ned went out front. "Good afternoon, may I help you?"

Matt stood still. The hand gripping his arm was heavy, and he was as aware of it as a sexual touch. All his nerves screamed from it. Roger's hot

breath was on his neck and felt like swamp air.

Out front, Matt heard Hope's voice. She had returned for her boutonniere. He thought maybe he should call out, but he didn't. He listened to Ned and Hope speak, listening for a suggestion in Ned's voice that something was wrong, but he couldn't detect even a hint of uneasiness. He heard the display cooler's door slide open and Ned say, "Here we are." Hope emitted a tiny squeal of delight and said it was perfect. There was the electronic totaling of the cash register, Hope's thank you, and the sound of her feet on the carpet as she moved towards the door.

Matt tried to reach out to her, to send her troubled waves of thought, before he realized she was not thinking about him and would not pick up his signals.

The bells jangled as she went out the door.

Even at the moment it struck Matt as ludicrous, but he pitied himself that she would never know how much he felt for her. He saw it as tragic.

Ned returned to the back room. The circular point of pressure pulled away from Matt's neck, and he discovered he had not been breathing.

"How was that?" asked Ned, his hands open at his side, his

face impassive, his eyes straight.

"Fine," said Roger. "Now get out there and lock the goddamn door and put up a closed sign."

"People'll think it's weird."

"Go do it," Roger spat.

Ned shrugged and went. Roger leaned around the corner to watch him.

The one thought that raced round Matt's mind but took him nowhere was, "I should do something." What, he had no idea, and his body seemed encased in cotton, but no matter how deeply or thoroughly he searched, he could find no fright in himself, only disbelief, which is not a good thing in the presence of lethal reality. Disbelief fills the eyes of a rabbit pinned by the bright white eyes of an auto. Disbelief is paralysis.

Matt did nothing and Ned returned, walking slowly, his arms still as if a thousand bees swarmed around them and he was cautious of being stung.

"You said we could maybe work something out," said Ned.

"I meant I *wish* we could work something out."

"Not quite the same thing."

"Not at all, man." Roger pushed Matt away from him, leveling the gun. "I'm sorry about this, it ain't—"

Ned ducked, jumping at Roger, moving to the side. The

florist grabbed for Roger's gun hand. One of them shouted. The gun fired, and blood sprinkled Matt's face and shirt front. The shot was as startling as waking from a falling dream, and yet it was Ned's blood on his face that brought belief. He more remembered seeing Ned fall into Roger, arms up as if charging into a punt, than actually seeing him die; it was more an afterimage, something he could never swear he saw, an odd twist of dimensions. It was not slow motion.

Matt did not mark when his body revolted and moved without his mind's approval or analysis. The shot spat, blood came on his face, and he scrambled away towards the open door of the cooler. Kicking into the refrigerator the two by four that propped the door open, he dragged the door shut behind him, found the lumber again, and jammed it between the handle and the door's body.

The boy backed away from the door, stepping back into the darkness, the cool freshness, breathing now, as though without the mind the body had been unable to concentrate on more than one action at a time.

Still his mind was struggling with the reality of it. He put a hand to his blood-freckled face, wiped it with the tips of his fingers, and looked but could



not see anything in the dark.

The door's handle jerked against the wood. The handle jerked angrily again, then twice more rapidly. "Come outta there," Roger said, harsh and severe as a jailer. "I said come out of there, goddamnit. Come—out—of—there." The handle shook with the force of his pulls, but the two by four held.

Matt leaned against the back wall of the cooler, closed his eyes. "Okay" ran through his mind, then it ran through again: it was a reassurance that played over and over—a stuck record.

Apart from the whirring of the refrigerator's motor and fan, Matt could hear nothing; the drone of the motor entered his mind, calming him like a cool cloth, and when he opened his eyes he knew he was safe. Roger had stopped yanking the door and kicking the cooler. Matt smelled the freshness of the flowers in the buckets and the greens in boxes on the shelves. The air had the scent of a pine forest in March. He could turn on the light, but he decided it felt better, safer, in the dark. All he had to do now was wait; there is nothing safer or surer than waiting, he thought.

He slid down the wall and sat on the floor. Staring into the

darkness hurt; so he closed his eyes, but the darkness was the same.

"Matt." Roger was talking through the door, his voice sounding thick and dull, like the voice of a dead man. "Hey, Matt, listen. He ain't dead, Ned's not dead yet. He's still alive. You hear me?"

Matt said nothing.

"I ain't lyin', man. I just checked him. He ain't dead. He's gonna be, though, if he don't get no help, Matt. He needs help bad. You know I didn't mean to shoot him, man. It was an accident. He came at me, and the gun went off. You know that, you saw it. It was an accident. You know that, right?"

Matt just said nothing.

"Matt? Matt, listen, you gotta come outta there. You come out, and soon's I leave you can call an ambulance and save him. Otherwise, man, I don't know, I may have to finish him off right now, and I don't wanna have to do that. It ain't my intention. None of this was, you know that. We're friends, man, I don't wanna hurt you, I just wanna work somethin' out so everybody's happy. Know what I mean? Why don'tcha come outta there, okay? We'll work somethin' out. Okay, Matt?"

Did the boy believe Roger

about Ned's still being alive? If he did, he must do something other than wait because outside death time becomes important. If he did not believe Roger, he could call his bluff and stay where he was, safe in the metal box, protected as if in a tank or a tomb. And if he chose not to believe Roger and he was wrong, Ned might die when he could have been saved; if he believed and was deceived, then he would be stupid, acting to help a dead man stay alive and probably becoming dead himself.

He was not now sure of Ned's death, if he had ever been, and there seemed to be little choice—all that remained was the choosing. It is choosing that invites cowardice.

He would have to do something. And fear stretched out in the base of his stomach and ran a long fingernail down his esophagus; he swallowed to erase the scratch. His entire body became tight with fear. Sweat surfaced on his palms, and he wiped it away. Think, he told himself. *Think*. But he could not think. Whispers of failure and death ran like rumors through his mind, and that was all he could hear.

"Are you listenin' to me?" Roger called from outside. "Huh?"

Matt swallowed. "Yeah," he

said. "I'm listening. I'm not coming out."

"Goddamn it, kid, I ain't got the time to be messin' around. Now, open this door." Roger once again began tugging at the handle. The wood grunted with the shock.

Matt moved to the door. The idea had come to him whole, and he knew without study that if he did not do it now, he would succumb to fear's million what-ifs and would regret the defeat his entire life.

During a pause in Roger's attacks on the door, Matt removed the two by four, held it, and waited close to the entrance. It would have to be timed well, there was no room for error.

If you miss, you're dead, he thought, and couldn't stop thinking. If you miss, you're dead, if you miss, you're dead, if you miss, you're dead, dead, dead, dead dead, dead, dead—

Roger lunged back on the door handle, the door opened easily, and he stumbled back like an anchor on the winning side of a tug of war. Matt jumped into the room, looking for the hand with the gun. He swung the lumber down, cracking Roger's wrist, and the gun clattered to the floor. Roger was screaming, reaching for the weapon with his other hand. Matt stepped in, and a blow to

the man's head stopped all that.

By the doorway to the front room, Ned lay on his back. The bullet had gone up through his cheek; he was dead, his face caved in and bloody.

Ned couldn't tell when he had died, and later the coroner would not be able to state without doubt that Ned had died instantly. Roger might not have been lying. And perhaps if Matt had acted quicker, more decisively . . . but he'd never know. It was all timing, and it had nothing to do with anything and there was no beating it.

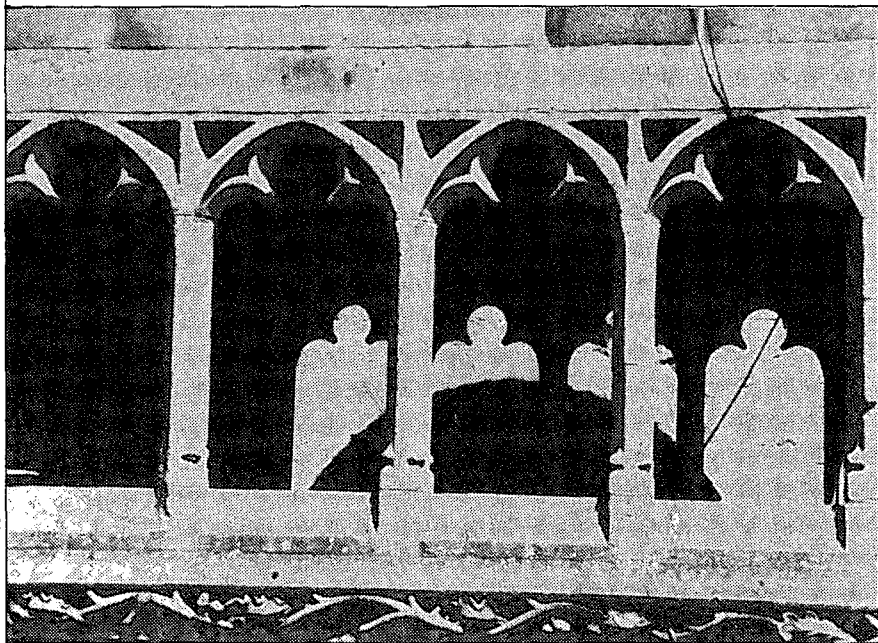
Matt knelt beside Ned's body. The piece of shrapnel had twisted out from under the florist's shirt. Matt touched it and thought of putting it around his own neck, to remember as Ned had done, but he thought better

of it and merely replaced the chain inside Ned's shirt, against his chest and close to his heart.

It was quiet in the shop, quieter than it had been in the cooler; somber, less insular. The boy sat by Ned's body and held its hand, unwarm and unfriendly as it was. In his other hand Matt held the two by four: it added feet to his height. He would never again feel a need to stretch. He was detached and determined, but unafraid.

When the police arrived, he had to get up to go let them in, and the bells on the door jangled as if it were any other Monday business. The bloodied two by four in Matt's hand, however, made it clear that it was not, and the way the boy held it was evidence that he had no intention of ever letting it go.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Photograph by Veena Raghuvaran

Angels unawares. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

# Carmine and the Christmas Presence

by Charles  
Ardai



“It is for my daughter, but it's not just for her. Do you understand what I'm telling you?” Guy Weston looked at his watch. “Hold on a sec.” He pressed his intercom button. “Debbie, keep McCabe out there another minute, will you?” He released the button.

Across the desk, Carmine Turturo shifted his hands in his lap.

“I want this for her for Christmas, Carmine. But I'm not going to be here for Christmas. I leave for Tokyo on the eighteenth. And if I'm going to pay you to build the damn thing, I want to see it before I go. So be sure it's finished before the eighteenth. I'll have Martin make space for it in the living room, and you can bring it in any time after the tenth. Understand?”

Carmine nodded. “Can I ask you one thing? Was the tree your idea or your wife's?”

“What do you think?” Weston looked at his watch again. “Any other questions?”

“No,” Carmine said. “No questions.”

It was cold out, so Carmine pulled his coat tight around him until he was inside his apartment. Even then, he took some time to warm up, rubbing his hands together in his gloves

and pressing his thighs against each other through his pants. The radiator was hissing and clanking as though the landlord had just turned on the heat, but he hadn't; the pipes were as cold as the pans in Carmine's kitchen cabinet. The clanking and hissing were only sound effects. Carmine didn't know how the landlord created them, but it certainly wasn't the ordinary way.

Carmine took down his biggest saucepan, filled it with water from the tap, and set it on top of his gas range. In a few minutes, the water started to give off steam. Carmine unbuttoned his jacket. A little later, he took it off. Then he sat on his bed and removed his shoes.

In one corner of his bedroom, Carmine had his workbench set up with all his tools. There wasn't enough room for much in the way of materials, just odds and ends of scrap wood that he had saved out from his last job. But this was enough to test out new designs or to whittle into interesting shapes on particularly cold nights. Carmine couldn't sleep when he was cold, and in Buffalo that meant lots of nights for whittling.

His newest project sat in miniature on a stack of sketches: a hollow wooden Christmas tree. The tree had a

little entrance on one side of its trunk. From his bed, Carmine could look through it. Inside, a tiny human figure sat on a pedestal. This was one of the interesting shapes he had whittled one night, a project to keep his mind busy while he couldn't get to sleep. How small could you carve a human shape and still make it look like a person? Carmine had discovered the answer just before dawn: very small. With a sharp knife, very small indeed.

But small was not Carmine's worry now. Big was—big, with lots of detail. Guy Weston wanted a hollow tree for his little girl Kingsley. A life-sized wooden tree with an opening big enough for Kingsley to crawl through, and inside a life-sized wooden elf for her to fall in love with. Which would be easier than falling in love with her father, who was life-sized and wooden but not much of an elf.

Weston had come to Carmine because a friend of his wife's had had Carmine do their deck. "Carpentry with class" was apparently how Carmine had been recommended to Sophie Weston, back when the Westons had been set on adding a wing to their house. That had fallen through. But when Sophie had seen Carmine's portfolio of special projects, she had

hit on the idea of having him custom-make a Christmas gift for Kingsley. She didn't know what, but something special.

That was the last he had heard of the idea, and that had been in July.

But now it was November, and he had come home one afternoon to a message from Weston's secretary, Debbie, on his answering machine. Carmine had called Weston back and heard the good news direct from the boss's mouth: the deal was on. That was how Weston had put it.

The deal was that Carmine would create a work for hire, under deadline, to Guy Weston's specifications. Which specifications were typed out in memo form with a line at the bottom for Carmine's signature. Which Carmine gave. A job was a job.

At least this was an interesting job—something special, as Sophie had put it. The specifications were clear enough: no pointy beard on the elf, no small pieces on the tree that might break off and injure Kingsley. There was nothing outrageous.

And heaven knew Kingsley Weston deserved something nice for Christmas, something to make up for not having her father around for the holiday, though Carmine imagined that



not having Guy Weston around was pretty nice all by itself.

So Carmine had agreed to take the job.

And then he had gone to that awful meeting in Weston's office where Weston had carefully negotiated him down to half his fee. Which Carmine had reluctantly accepted because half was better than nothing, and nothing was what he had coming in if he turned down this job.

So he went to his sketchpad, and then to his workbench, coming up with a design that would be sturdy and safe. And he took it back to Guy Weston, who looked at it, shrugged, and said he would show it to his wife.

Today had been Carmine's fourth meeting with Guy Weston, and he found himself wishing it had been his last. Weston was a rotten father and a rotten human being, not to mention a rotten customer, and Carmine couldn't sit in the same room with him without feeling dirty. Photos of Weston's family hung behind his desk like trophies, Weston's beefy arms encircling his daughter or his wife or both at once, with an expression on his face in all the pictures that said, *Look what I've got. Good deal, huh?*

And always with the watch when you were with him, mak-

ing sure that you didn't use up a minute more than he had allotted you in his schedule. The first day they had met, Weston had cut Carmine off in the middle of a sentence. "Got to go," he had said. And he had gone.

Debbie had ushered Carmine out of Weston's office so quickly that time that he'd had to beg her to let him back in to get the portfolio he'd left on Weston's desk. She'd agreed, but just barely.

Carmine set his finished sketches aside and started working on enlarged details: the grooves of the trunk, the tapering branches, the arch of the opening. His pencil flew over the paper. Kingsley would get her tree, and by the deadline, too. Sophie would get the pleasure of making her daughter smile. And Weston—Weston would get the pleasure of having bought something else. That was the man's whole life as far as Carmine could tell. Buying something else.

Carmine scribbled out the design he was working on and started again on a new sheet of paper.

The pedestal inside the tree was modeled after a Doric column—that had been Sophie's idea. Sophie was quite a creative woman, though she didn't have much of a chance to show it. Planning a party for Guy's

partners seemed to be the extent of her self-expression, and she had to do that so often that she didn't have time for much else.

Once, over the summer, she had shown Carmine some sketches she'd made of the new wing they'd talked about adding. She was no architect, nor even a trained artist, but she had skill with a pen and Carmine had told her so. He had never seen her as happy as she had been when he'd said that.

Then, at the end of the summer, Sophie had called him to say that they weren't going to build the new wing after all. When she told him, she said it in her husband's words: the deal was off. She never said why, but it was clear that it had been Guy's decision.

It wasn't because they couldn't afford it—Carmine was offering the job for barely more than the cost of materials, and Guy Weston could have afforded twice that. Carmine didn't even think it was because Guy didn't want it; there's nothing a man like Guy Weston likes more than being able to tell everyone that he is adding a wing to his house.

No, Carmine felt certain that he had found out that Carmine had praised his wife's sketches. And Weston had realized that the new wing would be her

wing, or at least her design, and he couldn't stand that. So he had said no, and then had made her call Carmine and say no herself.

When he got the call, Carmine could almost feel Weston on the other end of the phone. He could almost see Weston standing behind Sophie with his hands on her shoulders, coaxing her.

Since then Weston had evidently decided, out of whatever shred of compassion there was in him, to let her at least have her tree. That was what he had meant when he had said that the gift was not just for his daughter. It was also a peace offering for Sophie.

That was another reason Carmine hadn't hesitated to take the job, and another reason that he would even put up with more meetings with Guy Weston. Sophie Weston would be happy, Kingsley Weston would be happy, and as for Guy Weston—he could go to hell.

Carmine shook his head. There was a kicker. He had caught the bastard with his secretary.

That had been the last nail in Weston's coffin as far as Carmine was concerned. He had almost called Sophie up and told her. She had a right to know what her husband was doing. But Carmine had decided in

the end that it wasn't his business to tell her.

Carmine had gone by for his second meeting with Weston on Tuesday instead of Thursday. It was an honest mistake; Carmine had scrawled "Weston—T. 2:00" in the notebook he carried in his pocket, but had forgotten which "T" he had meant. So he went on Tuesday.

The door to the office was unlocked, which was a careless mistake on Debbie's part. Carmine went in quietly, saw that Debbie wasn't at her desk, and walked up to Weston's office door.

It was open a crack. Through the crack, Carmine saw two pairs of naked legs on the carpet. He heard two voices. One of them was Weston's, and the other one was Debbie's.

So Carmine left. And went back on Thursday, feeling nothing for Guy Weston but contempt.

Carmine sat back in his chair and looked at the work he had done. In front of him were three sketches of the elf, the wooden doll he would carve for Kingsley. The elf's features were screwed up in an expression halfway between disgust and anger.

That's what I get for sketching and thinking about Guy Weston at the same time, Carmine thought. He turned his

pencil around to erase the elf's face. But he stopped himself.

On second thought, he liked the face. He could soften it a bit in the carving, but there was no reason an elf had to smile. Not much to smile about in the Weston house anyway.

Carmine worked on the sketches some more and then went to sleep when the heat finally came on. Over the following weeks, he bought wood with Weston's up-front money and started carving out the pieces that he would assemble into the tree. A week before the deadline, he took a solid block of wood and started carving the elf.

And then it was December seventeenth, and Carmine Turturo was finished.

He drove over in the early morning, the tree pieces rattling in the back of his station wagon. The elf sat on the seat next to him, strapped in with the seat belt. Its face hadn't gotten any softer, but Carmine thought the expression was the right one. The elf had one arm up, reaching over its shoulder, and in this hand it held a red cloth sack. Each morning Sophie would put a gift in the sack for Kingsley to find. Carmine wondered if she would think it was magic.

Martin was the Westons'

help, a gaunt, sad-faced man with a shock of yellow-white hair that lay on his head like a bad toupee. It was his own hair, Carmine was certain, but it looked like a cheap imitation. Martin helped Carmine unload the tree and carry it into the living room, where Guy Weston waited. The two men put the tree together while Weston watched. Finally, Carmine carried the elf in and held it out for Weston's inspection.

"What's that?" Weston pointed at the elf's face. "What the hell is wrong with you? Didn't I tell you this is for my daughter? You want her to have nightmares?"

Sophie Weston stepped forward and looked over her husband's shoulder. "I think it's very interesting."

Weston reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He unfolded it. "This is your contract, Turturo. See your signature there at the bottom? Now look up here. Here. Where it says you'll carve an elf." He waved at the elf. "That's not an elf. That's a god-damn gnome. That's a goblin! I'm not paying you."

"Mr. Weston," Carmine said, "you didn't specify how the elf should look. You didn't say you wanted to see it beforehand. You want me to change it, it

will take a few days at least."

"In one day I'll be in Japan, mister."

"Guy, it's all right." Sophie put her hands on his arm. "I think it's very beautiful."

"Thank you," Carmine said.

Guy looked at his wife, then at Carmine. Then he picked up the elf. "I'll pay you half," he said.

In the end, Carmine agreed.

Sophie helped Martin position the tree in the living room. They had to push the stereo console against the wall to do so, and that meant moving a pair of Chippendale chairs to make room. A little reshuffling was all that was necessary—the living room was enormous and could easily hold the new addition.

The bottom of the tree was covered with a thick layer of felt, so as not to scratch the hardwood floor. The trunk and branches had been left unpainted to match the room's decor. Inside, Carmine had painted the trunk wall nut brown and the pedestal leaf green. The elf's suit was stained Santa Claus red, to match the sack. The elf's face remained the natural color of the wood.

Sophie set the elf on its pedestal, the sack hanging down behind it like a cape, then

crawled out of the tree backwards. Her shoulders were just narrow enough to fit through the opening. "Guy, it's wonderful."

"Certainly cost enough."

"Kingsley will love it." She kissed her husband, quickly, on the cheek.

He looked at his watch.

"What is it?"

"Got to go."

"Wait till Kingsley has seen it," Sophie said. "Please."

"Kingsley!" Weston bel-  
lowed. "Come down here."

Kingsley sang out from her bedroom on the second floor, "Coming!" A minute later, she appeared on the stairs.

When she saw the tree, a huge smile spread over her face. She circled the trunk, found the opening, and went inside. When she came out again, she was carrying the elf in her arms. "Oh, Daddy, I love it! He's wonderful! Is he mine?"

Weston held his watch up for his wife to see.

"Yes," Sophie said. "He's yours."

"Thank you!" Kingsley spun the doll around. "I'm going to call him Ernie, Daddy!"

"Good," Weston said. "Got to run. Merry Christmas."

The tree did not fit in, not really. Not with the Mondrian hanging behind it or the Ma-

levich on the other wall, not with the Tiffany lamp on the end table, and certainly not with the pieces in the display case by the door. The tree was too simple, too straightforward. It would fit in a poor man's apartment and put a rich man's home to shame.

But that was not particularly a bad thing. Sophie liked the effect the tree had. It stood in the middle of the room as though it had grown there overnight, pushing the ostentatious reminders of Guy's taste as a decorator off to the sides. The tree dominated the room now, as Sophie had known it would. She was glad she had talked Guy into commissioning it, and especially into hiring Carmine Turturo. She didn't think anyone else could have made it.

And the elf! The elf was so realistic it was almost unnerving. The detail work was exquisite: the little man's wrinkled cheeks and forehead, his hard fingernails just long enough to want paring, the tiny bunions pressing out at the sides of his boots. It was extraordinary, really.

Each morning when Sophie awoke, she crawled into the tree to put a gift in Ernie's sack. Then she went back to sleep and, a few hours later, was awakened by Kingsley's

delighted squeal. Kingsley would run into Sophie's bedroom, all flying limbs and blonde hair, and show her mother what Ernie had brought her.

But those minutes spent in the tree were special all by themselves. Sophie grew to relish them, to wake up earlier and earlier so she would be able to spend more time sitting with her back to the pedestal, Ernie's sack behind her head, looking out at the room she lived in. She felt safe and private sitting in the tree, safe from the life she had built up with Guy and safe from her role as Guy Weston's wife.

His trip to Japan was a blessing, really. Sophie didn't mind being alone for Christmas any more. Spending the holiday with Guy was worse. She even found herself wishing, sometimes, that Guy would never come back. Not that he would die or get lost, but that time would slow down and the days before Christmas would extend forever. Each day she would give Kingsley another gift, each day she would wake up hearing laughter, and New Year's Day, when Guy was to return, would never come.

She started to cry once when she thought of this. It was three days before Christmas and she had just put a stuffed turtle in

Ernie's sack. She turned to Ernie and looked up into his face, and through her tears she thought she saw his beige face blush a pale pink. When she wiped the tears away, the blush was gone.

She didn't think about it again until the next morning when, crying once more, she looked at Ernie and saw his eyes blink shut and then open again. The wooden elf's lips trembled, as though about to speak, and then were solid and fixed when Sophie stood to look closer.

She left the tree feeling foolish and self-conscious, the stern self-control Guy preached taking hold of her.

But the day before Christmas there was no mistaking it. Sophie woke before dawn and sat in the tree facing Ernie. His body never moved, but his cheeks inflated with breath, and his eyes grew moist and dark. His voice, when it came, sounded deep, like the wind blowing through a pipe or a horn.

"Your husband is not in Japan." The voice seemed to echo inside the tree. "He never got on the plane from Hawaii."

The doll's lips barely moved. But they moved.

Sophie was mute.

"He is cheating on you, Sophie."

The words could barely come out of her mouth. "With Debbie?"

Slowly and gravely, Ernie nodded.

"God!" Sophie's tears ran onto her palms as she put her head in her arms.

"Your daughter loves you very much."

"My husband hates me!"

"No," the doll said. "But you hate him."

"Yes," Sophie said. She looked up into his angry face. "Have there been other women?"

"Many," said the elf.

"And you know this? How?"

"Because you know it."

Sophie nodded. "Thank you," she said.

"Merry Christmas," said the elf.

On the first day of January, Guy Weston drove back to his house. It was already dark, though it was only the early evening, and he drove slowly to give his digestion a chance to settle. Flying gave him an upset stomach.

He was not surprised to find his house dark when he arrived. Earlier in his marriage he would have expected Sophie to wait for him and wrap him in her arms as soon as he walked through the door. But that spark had died long ago, to be

replaced by an unbecoming iciness. It wasn't entirely Sophie's fault, Weston knew; he'd handled her badly, too. But she was the only one who could change it now, and from the looks of things she wasn't going to change it tonight. He'd walk into a dark house, climb into a dark bed, and wake up in a dark mood. Her own fault.

He unlocked his front door noisily. If they woke up, that was too bad. It was his house, wasn't it? No reason he should have to sneak around in the dark.

He flipped on the lights.

The living room was empty.

The walls were stark white, with squares of clean paint where the pictures had hung. The antiques were gone—it wasn't that the cabinet was empty, it wasn't there at all. The stereo, the recessed bar and projection TV console, the Tiffany lamp, the end table—all gone. A note taped to the wall began, "Guy, I'm taking Kingsley."

At the instant Guy Weston's eyes fastened, with disbelief, on the note, a single, loud knock came on Carmine's door.

He turned off the gas under the pot of soup he was stirring, put down his spoon, and went to look out the peephole. He saw no one in the hall.



Part of Carmine told him to ignore the knock, that it was either nothing or something he shouldn't open the door to, but another part of him moved his hands to turn the locks and lift the chain bolt.

Outside, silhouetted by the hallway's fluorescent light, was a three foot tall man in a parka and boots with a bulging red sack on his back. He pushed past Carmine and dropped the sack on the floor. Carmine let the door swing shut. Otherwise he couldn't move.

The little man bent over the sack and undid the tie that held it closed. Then he reached in and started pulling out item after item, filling Carmine's apartment with jewels and antiques and flatware and appliances. When, at last, the sack was empty, Ernie climbed in it and pulled it closed over his head.

Carmine didn't open the sack until days afterward and when he did, he only found his carved elf, its features locked in a blissful smile.

*—with thanks to Connie Scarborough*

*Important Notice to Subscribers: All subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. For change of address, please advise six to eight weeks before moving. Send us your current mailing label with new address.*

# UNSOLVED

by Walter  
Shepherd

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the February issue.*

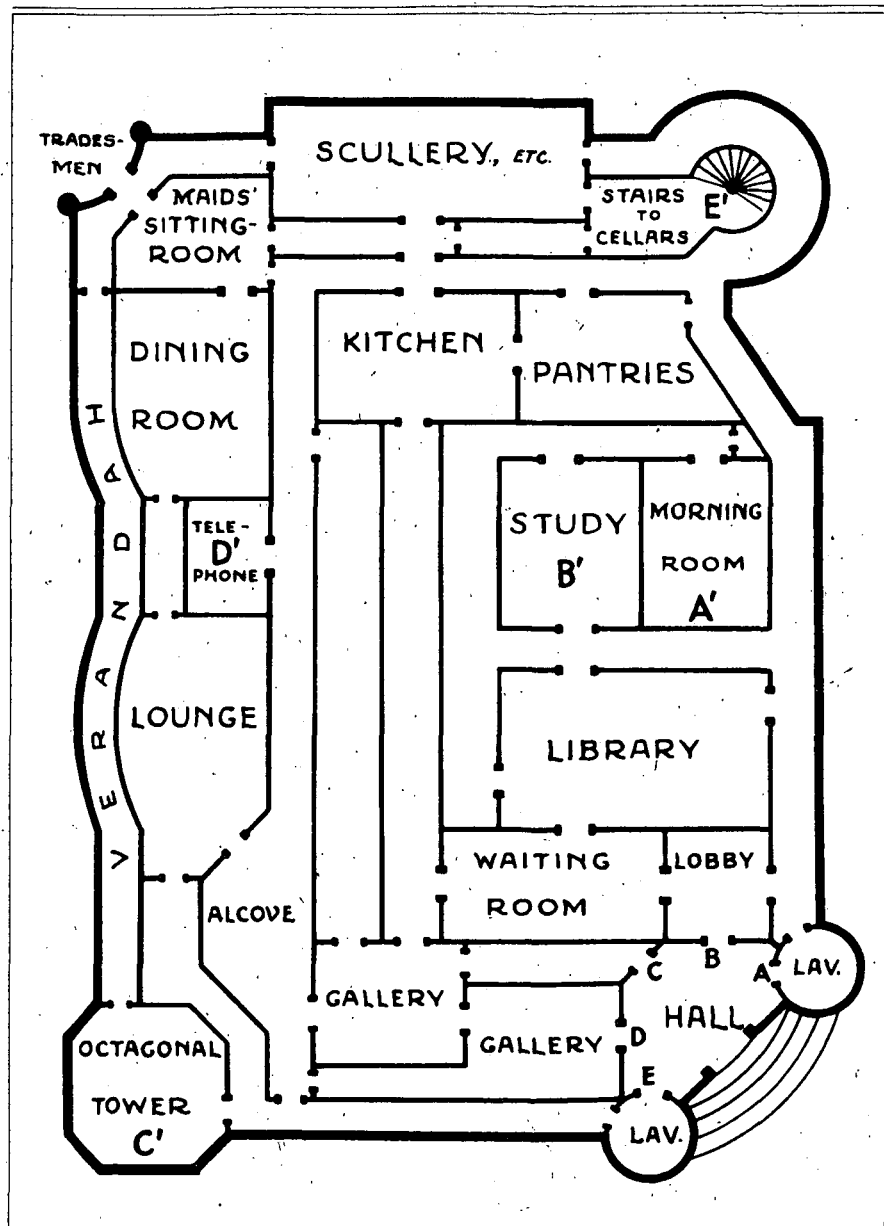
When the eccentric Viscount Suspectem decided to have an internal telephone system installed in his castle, he insisted that the five lines from the Hall to the Morning Room, Study, Octagonal Tower, Telephone Box, and Cellars should be kept separate so that conversations could not be accidentally overheard. The lines were to run from A to A', B to B', C to C', D to D', and E to E', but they were never to cross one another or to pass through the same rooms or corridors.

This was a stiff problem, and the engineers finally wrote down the letters in their approximate positions on a blank sheet of paper, and after connecting them up with lines which never crossed, transferred them to the plan, fitting them into the rooms and corridors so that each had a separate path of its own. There is only one way in which this could have been done. What was it?

---

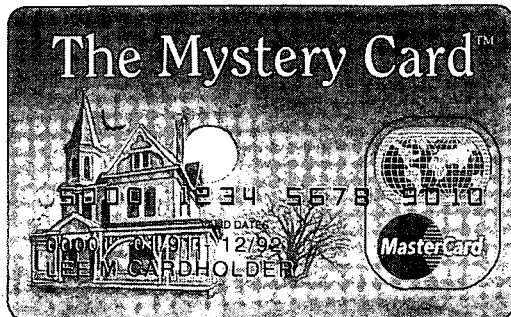
See page 148 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

"The Castle Telephones," from MAZES AND LABYRINTHS: A BOOK OF PUZZLES by Walter Shepherd, © 1961 by Dover Publications, Inc., original book titled FOR AMAZEMENT ONLY, published by Penguin Books, Ltd., copyright 1942. Used by permission of Rupert Crew Ltd. (London).



# Your Passport to Intrigue

Apply for the new "Mystery Card" MasterCard!



"Every time you use 'The Mystery Card,' a percentage of the amount charged goes to support the pioneering medical research of the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation at no extra cost to you."  
Joel Davis — President,  
*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.*

Put some "Mystery" into your everyday life.

Use the MasterCard for Mystery Readers.

**No annual fee\***

\*(for the first year, and later depending upon usage.)

Annual Percentage Rate for Purchases	Variable Rate Information	Grace Period for Repayment of the Balance for Purchases
Variable Rate <b>16.4%</b>	Your Annual Percentage rate may vary. The Rate is determined by adding 7.9% to the New York Prime Rate as published in the <i>Wall Street Journal</i> on the first Friday of the preceding month.	Not less than 25 days
Method of Computing the Balance for Purchases	Annual Fee	Minimum Finance Charge
Two-cycle Average Daily Balance Excluding New Purchases	<b>\$20.00*</b>	50¢ If it would otherwise be greater than zero and less than 50¢
Other Charges	*There is no Annual Fee for the first year.  The \$20 Annual Fee will be waived in subsequent years for card accounts with total annual purchases in the previous year of at least \$6,500.	
Over-the-Credit-Limit Fee: \$15 Cash Advances: 2% (minimum \$2, maximum \$10) Return Check Fee: \$15 Late Payment Fee: 5% of each payment due or \$5, whichever is lower		

The information about the costs of the cards described in this application is accurate as of June 1991.  
This information may change after that date.

To find out what may have changed, call us at (406) 761-8922 or 1-800-735-5536,  
or write to BanCard Corporation of Montana, P.O. Box 5023, Great Falls, Montana 59403-5023.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# The Mystery Card™

MasterCard®

APPLICANT INFORMATION				001-003-00003	
FIRST NAME		INITIAL		LAST NAME	
DATE OF BIRTH / /		SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER — —		HOME PHONE ( ) -	
ADDRESS		CITY		STATE	ZIP CODE YEARS THERE
PREVIOUS ADDRESS		CITY		STATE	ZIP CODE YEARS THERE
PRESENT EMPLOYER		WORK PHONE ( ) -		YEARS THERE	
PREVIOUS EMPLOYER (if with present employer less than one year)		WORK PHONE ( ) -		YEARS THERE	
GROSS ANNUAL INCOME* \$		TOTAL MONTHLY PAYMENTS (INCLUDE HOME, CAR, PERSONAL, CREDIT CARD LOANS, ETC.) \$		PREFERRED CREDIT LIMIT \$	
NEAREST RELATIVE NOT LIVING WITH ME		RELATIONSHIP		TELEPHONE ( ) -	
<b>CO-APPLICANT INFORMATION</b>					
FIRST NAME		INITIAL		LAST NAME	
DATE OF BIRTH / /		SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER — —		HOME PHONE ( ) -	
ADDRESS		CITY		STATE	ZIP CODE YEARS THERE
PREVIOUS ADDRESS		CITY		STATE	ZIP CODE YEARS THERE
PRESENT EMPLOYER		WORK PHONE ( ) -		YEARS THERE	
PREVIOUS EMPLOYER (if with present employer less than one year)		WORK PHONE ( ) -		YEARS THERE	
GROSS ANNUAL INCOME* \$		TOTAL MONTHLY PAYMENTS (INCLUDE HOME, CAR, PERSONAL, CREDIT CARD LOANS, ETC.) \$			
<small>*Your alimony, child support and separate income need not be disclosed if you do not wish to have it considered as a basis for repaying this obligation.                      *Required minimum combined annual income is \$12,000.</small>					
I authorize BanCard Corporation of Montana to check my credit and employment. I agree that I will be subject to the terms and conditions of the Cardholder Agreement sent with the card.					
X _____ Applicant's Signature		_____ Date		X _____ Co-Applicant's Signature	
				Date	
Please mail this application or a photocopy to: BanCard Corporation, P.O. Box 5023, Great Falls, Montana 59403-5023.					

FICTION

# Pritt the Twit

by Anne  
Peverell

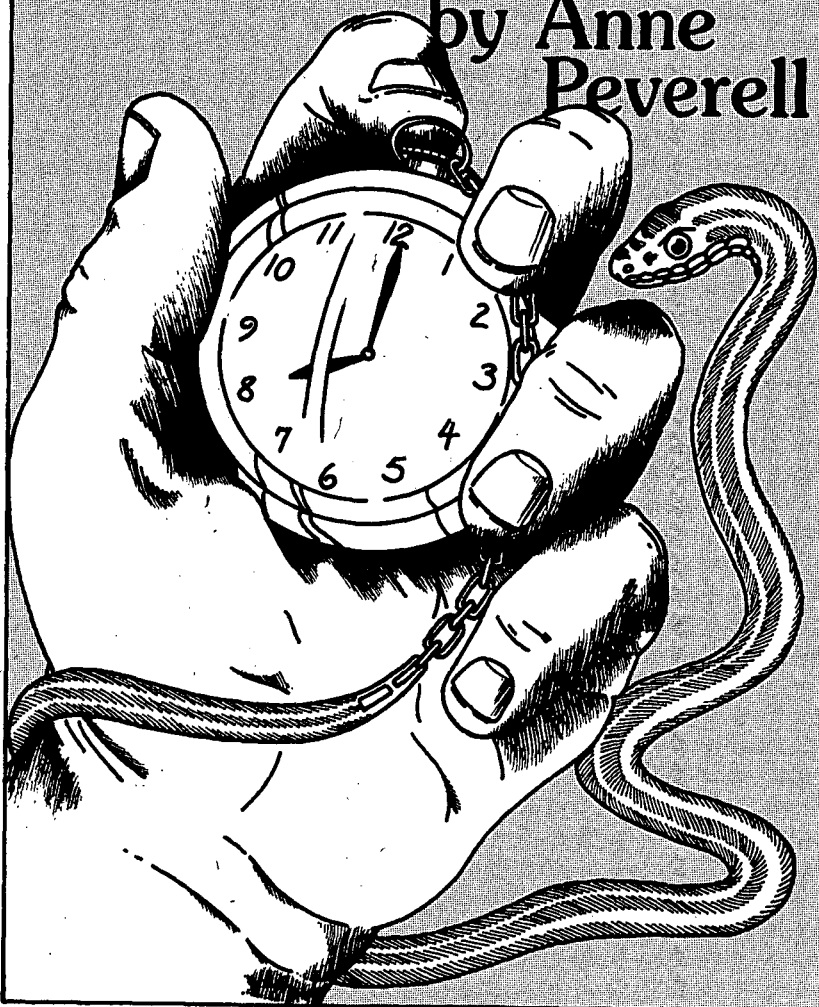


Illustration by Richard Sauer

79

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pritt was a fool to himself, really. Not bad—well, not evil anyway—just daft. Easily led. Pritt wasn't his real name, of course, but everyone called him that, even his teachers, because from an early age he'd gotten the reputation that everything he touched seemed to stick to his fingers. As to being a twit—he wasn't really *thick*. Just a bit slow.

After that bit of bother with Mr. Snow, his head teacher, and his suspension from Gas Lane Upper, Pritt had been lucky to get a packing job in the warehouse, down by the station. The one that sends out those special offers that appear in the Sunday supplements and women's magazines. But that didn't last long, either, because after a run of petty thefts the overseer had reluctantly called in the fuzz and the tall young constable hadn't taken long to recognize a familiar name from the list of employees and stab at it with a nicotine-stained finger.

"Get rid of *him*," he'd said. Adding deliberately, "He's *trouble*."

So you couldn't really blame the overseer when he'd done just that. Nor the fuzz, either. For Pritt's old man had been just the same: well known to the boys in blue as up to every kind of second-rate caper, from

fiddling nylons and petrol coupons as a promising young spiv after World War II, to flogging some very dodgy car insurances and MOT's some thirty years later when he'd met his early, unlamented demise. Pritt Senior had croaked at the age of fifty, on a surfeit of what had always been his priorities: fags, booze, and dubious birds, leaving his old woman, Myrtle, with their five-year-old boy, Pritt (a late joy, you might say, for middle-aged parents), some very irate customers, and a clapped-out Jag.

It was midafternoon and Pritt was at home in the apartment, the rent of which Myrtle raised by slaving over a hot cash register at the local mini-mart. Pritt was slouched down deep in the armchair, his mouth open, one hand clutching a half empty beer can, watching TV. He had not bothered to look for another job since the unpleasantness at the warehouse. Just been content to sign on for his dole every fortnight and then, on receipt of the welfare check and after making the usual phone call, setting about getting rid of it—easy come, easy go—down at the pub or shooting pool with his mates. Later, money gone and after being chased out of the Pentagon (the flash new shopping center in the middle



of town in which the pool hall was housed) by the security boys, he'd end up back at the apartment, scrounging whatever food or drink was going and lounging around, watching the racing on the box. Today, because of the weather, there was no racing, just a boring old repeat of some boring old antiques program in which people brought their valuables to a panel of experts, hoping to hear that they were in possession of a priceless piece of china or painting, mostly to discover that they were not.

"A lot o' stoopid ol' fools, with a lot o' stoopid ol' rubbish" as Pritt put it, sniggering now until suddenly catching sight of a familiar face. He shot up in his chair, the grin sliding off his face. The last time Pritt had seen that ugly mug was the day he'd got the chop from Gas Lane. It was old Snow—Septimus Snow, B.A.—his old head teacher, who'd had him and his pal Rhino into his study for caning more times than the two lads had had hot dinners. Who'd got Pritt suspended.

What the blazes was he doing on an antiques program? An exhibit maybe, Pritt sniggered. He was old enough. Though, now he came to think about it, there'd been a lot of talk by some of the teachers about his "collection."

Mr. Snow, coupled with Pritt's last day at Gas Lane, had remained fixed indelibly and painfully in Pritt's memory. He'd never been able to forget him. For Pritt blamed the school and, in particular, Snowy, for his bad start in life, for the fact that he couldn't now get a job, let alone hold it down.

That last morning Rhino's mum had detailed the two boys to call in on Rhino's sick old gran before they went to school. She lived in an old people's development on the way to Gas Lane.

"Get her up for me, son," Rhino's mum said. "Don't argue," she'd continued as Rhino opened his mouth to complain. He contented himself by pulling a face, which she ignored while handing him a key. "Tell her I overslept—I'll be along later to see to her."

Pritt never liked it in the old girl's place. It smelled, not to put too fine a point on it: a combination of old lady, old moggy, and something—if Pritt was honest—that happened to him on the nights when he went to bed worried or anxious.

As usual, the old girl was still in bed when they got there, waiting for someone to come and pull her out, get her breakfast, then maneuver her, with difficulty, to the big chair in the bay window where she'd spend

the rest of the day, shaking and watching the world go by. A day broken only by the arrival of Meals on Wheels just before midday and, later, Rhino's mum on the way back from work. She'd get the old girl's tea, clear *that* up, and then, afterwards, shuffle her back into bed.

What a life, thought Pritt, standing near the front door, trying not to breathe. Just then, Gran settled, Rhino returned. Pritt opened the front door as Rhino yelled, "Bye, Gran," then puzzled Pritt by slamming the door shut before they could get outside.

Shaking his head at the younger boy to shut him up, Rhino turned to the sideboard, bent down and gently opened it, and ferreted about inside. After a minute or so, he stood up again clutching a couple of small objects wrapped in tissue paper and shoved them at Pritt.

"Hold these," he whispered and snatched up Pritt's red sandwich tin, opened it, and tipped Pritt's lunch into his own larger plastic box.

"Old on," Pritt whispered back, alarmed. "What's your game? That's my dinner, mate."

"All right, all right," muttered Rhino. "You'll get it back."

"What you *doin'*, Rhino?"

Pritt said. What a twit! He really didn't know. "What's all that in there?"

"Wages," grinned Rhino, snapping the lid shut and pushing the box back at Pritt. He eased the door open and the two boys crept out.

Chances are, they'd have got away with it if only Snowy hadn't taken their R.E. class that morning. He was filling in for their usual teacher, who was at home nursing her sick mother. Very sympathetic about mothers, Snowy was, having nursed one of his own on and off for the last ten years. (That was how the boys had got away with being late that morning.)

Now, banging on *ad nauseam* about another bee in his bonnet, the importance of outside interests in order to maintain a healthy, well-rounded personality—compensation, even, for the disappointments of life, "which, as sure as," he was droning on, while chalking O-P-H-I-O-L-O-G-Y on the blackboard, his back to them, "God made little green apples—" he turned, just in time to see Pritt taking a crafty look at something under cover of his desk lid.

While the boy remained pre-occupied, Snowy crept down the aisle, the others keeping up a fascinated silence, the rarity of

which would have warned anyone else that something was up. Not Pritt. Snowy pounced and grabbed him by the fleshy part of the ear, yanking him painfully to his feet.

He'd expected to see the usual well-thumbed copy of some girly magazine, but what he did find in the desk could not simply be dismissed by a detection, nor even a withering look and a "see *me* afterwards."

Pritt, and later (after Pritt's confession) Rhino, ended up in Snowy's study, complete with the red sandwich tin containing their ill-gotten gains. From it the Head had set out Gran's treasures on his desk, gazed at them for a bit, then looked up at the boys and proceeded to take them both apart.

Snowy was good at the old verbal cut and thrust, and it wasn't long before Rhino, at least, was reduced to tears. Afterwards both boys were caned, but only Pritt was sent home, with a note for Myrtle telling her he'd been suspended. Indefinitely. The police had not been called in.

Rhino, however, still carrying on like a big soft girl, his big hooter the color of raw meat, was kept behind in Snowy's study where he was offered another chance. On one condition. That he promised faithfully to give up friends

like Pritt who could only land him in trouble.

"He not only shows no remorse," Snowy had said, "but he's a *loser*, boy. Can't you see?" His sad, fatherly tones acting once more as a stimulant to Rhino's lachrymal glands.

Thus Rhino, at least, turned over a new leaf and henceforth became a model pupil. Even discovering an aptitude for woodwork, and later the Careers Master had pulled out all the stops and got him an apprenticeship at one of the many picturesque antique shops to which tourists flocked in the summer months, in the up-market part of town.

It could be said that, if Rhino forgot what he owed Snowy, Pritt never did and now every dole day, since he'd read of the death of Snowy's old mother just after Snowy's sudden decision to take early retirement, he'd got into the habit of phoning the old boy, announcing himself as "The Whispering Avenger," and treating him to a gobbet or two of anonymous abuse. Feeling, after those calls, a fleeting sense of power. Of old scores settled. Didn't the old sod deserve it? Hadn't he lost him his only friend? Got him chucked out of school and, Pritt was convinced, been somehow responsible for losing

him whatever job he'd subsequently managed to get?

Those few moments on the phone fed Pritt's appetite for revenge, and briefly he feasted on the mental picture of the old man's silly, frightened-rabbit face and the sound of panic and inadequacy in his voice. Something like the inadequacy of having no job—no hope of one—and no money. And the panic that he, Pritt, always felt (though he'd never admit it) at the sight of a dark blue uniform.

During those few moments on the phone, Pritt felt tough and masterful. Someone listened to *him* for a change. Last time, Pritt remembered with satisfaction, the old fool had even broken down and cried. Pleading with Pritt to leave him alone. That he was an old man—all alone now—

Pritt had almost weakened, then remembered suddenly his mother's voice, all those years ago, when Dad had died: "Tears are easy, son. Pull yourself together. You're a man now."

*I'm alone, too*, he remembered, "and I never saw Rhino no more," he moaned at the TV set, but unfortunately, Snowy, in closeup, chose that very moment to laugh, as if somehow he'd actually heard the boy and remained, as always, totally indifferent to his distress.

"He was my mate," Pritt shouted at the smirking image. "You turned my best mate against me, and you messed up my chances, you old bastard."

But Snowy couldn't hear, of course. He was leaning forward, eager to listen to what the young expert in the navy blazer and pink silk tie had to say about the two pieces he'd brought to show him. And Pritt watched with a feeling of disbelief which grew ever stronger as the dapper young man unpacked the battered red sandwich tin of its nests of tissue paper. Slowly he leaned forward as if, like a rabbit before a snake, he was mesmerized by the handsome fob watch now being revealed to the camera.

"Look at this," the young man was crowing. "A dial made by Willis and hands by *Hood*." Head on one side, as if imbibing a particularly good wine, he continued after a pause, "I think *this* piece is worth —ooooh—about fifteen hundred pounds? Two thousand?"

Snowy nodded complacently, as if the young man had merely confirmed what he already knew. Pritt's fingers began tightening around the beer can. The young man was turning his attention to the second tissue nest.

"Oh! Now, here's a *beauty*. Thomas Chester of Dorset—"

and he lost no time prying open the back, which sprang away to reveal a delicately chased design on the old gold. In the center what looked like a small diamond was flashing splinters of light at the camera, as if signaling to the world its joy at being opened to the light of day once more.

Pritt uncoiled in the chair, without realizing it clenching his fist and crushing the half empty can, the beer trickling through his fingers to drip unheeded onto Myrtle's best tufted. She wouldn't be half mad, and normally that prospect would have been enough to galvanize him into a sudden frenzy of activity, clearing it up, but not today. Not now. He drew in his breath, hissing slightly, not even listening to what the expert had to say.

"*That* was a bloody silly thing to do, Snowy," he said, his eyes glittering. "Pinchin' my gear. A *bloody* silly thing. 'Cos I'm gonna *get* you now," and as the credits rolled up the screen to the background of the pedantic little eighteenth century tune, Pritt sprang out of the chair and loped into the hall, pausing at the door of the kitchen to fling the battered can in the direction of the sink before pulling on his jacket and letting himself out.

He knew exactly where he

was going and on reaching Park View, where Snowy lived—alone now, of course, since his mother's death—took the precaution of ducking into the phone booth on the corner to dial the number he knew by heart. No answer.

Grinning, Pritt emerged to pad up the leafy avenue, on the opposite side of the road from the house he was looking for. Most of the large, detached houses in Park View were the sort that had a well-displayed burglar alarm on the front. But not Snowy's. Silly old fool. Though that didn't mean anything, nor the fact that he hadn't answered the phone: he might be out in the garden or taking a leak. So Pritt decided he'd walk past first—all casual-like—then quickly dodge back and down the little alleyway that ran along the side of Snowy's house to the playing fields behind, and get in the back way.

He was in luck. The playing field was deserted except for one solitary jogger in a red track suit down at the far end. Quickly Pritt slipped over the wall and crept through the garden, using for cover some thick rhododendron bushes just in case some nosy neighbor was looking out of his window.

He grasped the back door handle, easing it round gently.

It was unlocked. "Snowy, what a stoopid old sod you still are," he giggled, surprised. By the time he tiptoed into the hall, the heavy soles of his Doc Martens squeaking on the parquet floor, and spied the familiar old biscuit tin placed dead in the center of the polished dining room table, he was so excited and drunk with success he didn't even stop to ask himself whether all this wasn't just a bit too easy. A bit too pat.

He strode quickly into the dining room, snatching up the familiar old box and holding it against his chest. He glanced around the room, heart thumping. Nothing here, only bits of old furniture, no sign of any of Snowy's hobbies, or of his famous "collection." Down here at any rate. Just an empty, dirty old fish tank over on the dresser.

Pritt lifted the lid of the tin and peered inside, only to feel a sharp stab of disappointment, for the tin was empty. Except—except—he felt another surge of excitement—wasn't that a bracelet in the corner? A dark, metal bracelet?

Pritt thrust in a large hand to fish it out and get a closer look. And Tilly, the elegant little viper that was the latest addition to Septimus Snow's collection of exotic reptiles, peevish at such a rude awaken-

ing, uncoiled slightly to drowsily sink her fangs into one of Pritt's stubby, probing fingers. Pritt didn't feel a thing, only a moment of terror when he realized just what Snowy's collection was. He flung the box away from him, but by then, of course, it was already too late.

**I**t was some time before things returned to normal that afternoon in Park View. The anxious knot of neighbors and passersby hung around for a while after the ambulance had screamed away, its lights flashing.

"Too late for chummy, though," the policeman who'd been sent out to move them on had told them. "Some young yobbo," he informed them, "fancying a quick in and out."

The crowd, some of whom knew of Mr. Snow's "collection," had finally been persuaded to disperse. But only after the policeman's reassurance that Tilly had been recaptured and was now restored to her friends in the warmth and comfort of their tank.

Back inside the house, a distraught Snowy, looking somewhat incongruous and shriveled in the red track suit that was several sizes too large for him, was telling the constable that he'd "only popped out for a few minutes. For my daily run.



And when I came back—" he choked on a sob at the memory. "The awful thing is," his voice was muffled, his head in his hands by now, "that that young lad was one of my old pupils."

The policeman fingered his notebook, embarrassed. "Try not to upset yourself, sir," he said gruffly. "This one was a wrong 'un from the start. You must have known that, if you were his teacher. A right chip off the old block was Pritt."

Snowy sighed. "I know you mean to be kind, officer, but I feel somehow as if I let him down. I *failed* him. And in the end—" he hesitated—"I *killed* him."

The policeman felt peeved. There was no helping some people. He stood up, cap in hand, peering in and giving it an imperceptible little shake before placing it, gingerly, on his head.

"Take it from me, sir. He was a loser. Any tea leaf worth his salt would've sussed the place out before entry. Made a few discreet inquiries. Most likely would've got to know all about your—" he paused—"your collection." He paused again: it would certainly be a long time before *he* forgot, and he excused himself for the shame of being nearly unmanned by fear when he had discovered the nature of the contents of the glass tanks

scattered about the house. Even worse, at the further discovery that one of their number was still at large, somewhere in the dining room. He had been only marginally reassured when Tilly had been found by the old boy and returned to her companions, some of whom writhed and knotted in welcome and some of whom lay unnaturally still, in silent and beady contemplation of the big policeman, standing on the other side of the glass, staring back at them.

Snowy had come up behind him unexpectedly, forcing from him an involuntary whimper of fear as he crooned lovingly, "Some people keep tropical fish. Others collect stamps. This is *my* collection, officer."

The policeman cleared his throat. "Try not to upset yourself," he repeated.

After the squad car had driven away, Snowy rose to pad over to the big oak dresser, pour himself a large brandy, and knock it back in one swift gulp. Setting down the glass, he slid open the heavy drawer beneath to remove two nests of tissue paper. Carefully, he carried them over to the biscuit tin, placed them inside, and closed the lid.

He'd been a fool about those fobs. Possibly. Acting on impulse. What was the old saw his

mother was so fond of quoting? Something about birds not fouling their own nests? Pritt could have told him, he thought, like a shot, in his own vulgar and inimitably limited way.

That was what he hated about Pritt and his kind, hated so much that it was a kind of therapy: their vulgarity, their limited vision. That was why, when the two fob watches—so elegant, so beautifully made—had turned up in the horny hands of that yob, he had felt offended—deeply offended—because Pritt would probably get a bigger thrill out of smashing them than even selling them to some fence for a ridiculously low price.

They were so beautiful. He'd felt totally justified in keeping them for a few days—then a little longer—and then, when there were no inquiries after them, keeping them for himself. That had been the start of it all. His other little hobby.

Perhaps he'd been an even bigger fool, though? Even more naive than Pritt and Rhino, and had gone too far in allowing them to be exhibited to an audience of millions on TV? But—he smiled—that had been part of it. Cocking a snook at a world that, since his early, unlamented retirement from Gas Lane and then his mother's death, didn't appear to notice

what he did and cared even less. A world that increasingly had no appreciation for the finer things in life and scorned the things that he had spent a lifetime teaching. A world that cared about and rewarded, it seemed, only the common, the coarse, and the uneducated popular.

But now Snowy dismissed such thoughts as merely negative and destructive. For hadn't he now, since Mother died, discovered a pastime infinitely more rewarding than anything else he'd done? The start of another collection that amounted to something like adequate compensation for what had increasingly come to seem like a lifetime of rejection?

The fobs were the start, certainly, but now there was all the rest: the fruits of the latest hobby that he had collected during those weekly forays to the shops. Only the big ones—they could afford it—and anyway, he'd been banned several months ago from the local corner shop.

He stashed his ill-gotten gains in the coat with the specially devised "poacher's pocket" and, once home with his plunder, dumped it upstairs, in his mother's old room, which the policeman, if he hadn't been so shit-scared (Snowy tittered at his unaccus-

tomed indelicacy) would have discovered, if only he'd looked inside.

"Piles and piles of the stuff," he hiccuped now. The drawers of the tallboy and chest of drawers were crammed to overflowing and the bed was heaped with merchandise: soap, light bulbs, tins of biscuits; sardines, and ham, bottles of shampoo and wine, tubes of toothpaste—you name it, he'd got it. Clothes, too, in the wardrobe—even the track suit he was wearing—enough stuff to last him a lifetime.

Everything had been threatened, of course, once the phone calls, the only calls he ever got now, had started. He'd recognized the voice straight away—who could forget that needling, self-pitying whine? And in one of the more recent, Pritt had actually mentioned Rhino by name. There was no mistaking who "The Whispering Avenger" was. And Snowy had known that, sooner or later, something would need to be done about him.

When the phone had rung that afternoon, less than half an hour after the repeat of the program taped a year ago, he hadn't answered it. He'd known it must be Pritt and that somehow he'd seen the program, too. He couldn't be absolutely sure that the boy was on his way to

the house, of course; nevertheless, as he always did after such a call, he went out for a jog, leaving the back door unlocked and Tilly on guard.

Snowy laughed, suddenly remembering the big policeman's face when, his hand actually on the doorknob of his mother's old room, Snowy'd said softly, "I call this my Aladdin's cave, officer. The best of my collection is kept in here. You'll want to see that."

The young man had frozen, just for a second, then had slowly taken his hand off the doorknob. "I don't think there'll be any need, sir," he said, his voice regaining strength and conviction at the end of the sentence. "If you say that the room hasn't been entered." And, sweating slightly, had started to talk fast about the need to have a proper burglar alarm fitted to the house.

No need for that, Snowy thought. Not now. He drew in a deep, almost sobbing, breath. How right he had been: the right interests, hobbies, in providing private interest and excitement. His own loyal little collection—his friends—weren't they all he needed to survive the emptiness of modern living? The best compensation for the disappointments of life?

He stumbled back to the

dresser to pour himself another brandy, raising the balloon glass to salute the amber eyes that were languidly surveying his movements from inside the glass tank; then he returned to the table, to sit in the dark and drink, the fingers of his free hand drumming on the lid of the tin.

On the other side of the front door, the big policeman is standing—back again, his hand poised over the bell.

Before driving to the station to make his report, he'd got his mate to stop off at the little corner shop so that he could get a pack of cigarettes—cursing himself, for he thought he'd kicked the habit two months ago. While in the shop, he'd gotten into conversation with the owner, a young Asian, extremely efficient and obviously keen to make a go of his new

premises by being extra cooperative.

"Mr. *Snow*?" he'd asked incredulously, when told of the break-in and asked whether he'd seen any suspicious characters hanging around. (Pritt might have had an accomplice. Unlikely, but you never know.) The shopkeeper darted a funny, sidelong look at the policeman, which irritated him. Just because they lived in this tight little middle-class ghetto, he thought, it didn't mean they were immune to the nasty invasions of privacy and peace of mind that seemed to be becoming such a commonplace these days. Anything but.

"Old *Snow*?" the shopkeeper had continued, sounding almost pleased. "Well, now. I might just have some information that will be of interest to you, officer—"

FICTION



## Murder in the Passage Vendôme

by Erich Obermayr

**T**he Passage Vendôme once aspired to greater things. The evidence of this conceit could still be seen in 1890, ten years after a syndicate of investors risked, then lost, their money in a vain attempt to improve the passage

and thus place it among higher class company, such as the Passages Jouffroy, des Princes, or des Panoramas—all models of comfort and prosperity, their shops richly stocked, bedecked with indoor greenery, and awash in light from glass roofs.

The skylight of the Passage Vendôme was to have run the alleyway's entire length, and building it would not have been so difficult an undertaking because, as tradition had it, the passage was no wider than necessary for two ox carts to pass. But the construction of the glorious portal for sun and sky never progressed beyond the first few doorways from Boulevard du Temple, and all that remained was a bare, rusted grid whose surviving panes of frosted glass could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Underfoot, the smooth cubes of imported red granite extended a mere ten paces back from the street before giving way to the tortuous surface of river cobbles that had sufficed since the Middle Ages.

True, several successful enterprises did occupy spaces at the Boulevard du Temple end of the passage. Among them were a bookstore and a haberdashery, and a few doors farther was the Taverne Tous-saint, an unappealing, though modestly profitable, hole in the wall. But on either side of the tavern, and from it to Rue Bé-ranger, there were nothing but locked doors, dust-coated windows, and more than a few addresses that had fallen into complete decay. The planks nailed across these doorways,

and the shutters over the windows, had been stripped away and burned for fuel by the more enterprising inhabitants of the neighborhood. Then the doors and windows themselves were smashed or made off with, the rooms picked clean, and their unprotected walls left to crumble into soggy, chalky piles.

It was from one such empty doorway that the feet of M. Claude Courgeon's corpse protruded and, in the dark of an April night, tripped Mlle. Amélie Bonnefon and sent her tumbling to the cobblestones. By all rights, she should have sped away in terror the moment she regained her feet. But she was held, fascinated and terrorized, by the benign inertness of the expensively shod feet, their heels touching and their toes pointed symmetrically outward. She was not held silently, however, and within minutes her shrieks had drawn a sizable crowd. When the police arrived, none of the peering, jostling assemblage had anything concrete to offer concerning the circumstances of M. Courgeon's unhappy end or who, in the meantime, had stolen his shoes.

Two hours later, Paul Aichele, retired inspector of police, closed the book in his lap and



drew a breath to blow out the lamp on the table beside him. But a tapping at the study window gave him pause. He parted the drapes and saw, beaming in the lamplight, the face of a young boy—a street urchin—named Leopold.

Leopold earned money for himself by carrying messages between persons who, for one reason or another, could not avail themselves of the usual channels. That night he bore a hastily scrawled note from a pickpocket named Arturo, from the Conciergerie, where Arturo was being held—falsely accused, of course—on a murder charge. He begged his "dear friend" Aichele to come immediately to his assistance.

During his years at the Préfecture, Aichele had observed Arturo's career as it progressed along its nefarious way, but by no stretch of the imagination did he ever count himself among Arturo's friends. He kept track of him because, for a good detective, maintaining a familiarity with a milieu of petty criminals was part of a day's work. To catch big fish, one watched for signs among the schools of little ones. Arturo was not Aichele's friend, nor was he an "innocent" man. But unless he had undergone a radical change in character, neither was Arturo the stuff of

which murderers were made.

Few Parisians could gain admittance to the Conciergerie in an unofficial capacity, especially when the hands on the Tour de l'Horloge clock read two A.M. But few people knew the captain of the guard personally, or had shared many years of comradeship with him. Shortly after his arrival, one of the jailers led Aichele down the cold stone steps and cramped corridors of the most famous dungeon in the world.

Arturo leaped to his feet when he saw his visitor, and in his eagerness practically hurled himself against the barred window of his cell's thick wooden door.

"Inspector Aichele!" he cried out. "You've come." He thrust his left, and only, hand through the bars. Aichele returned the handshake with his own left hand.

Arturo's right hand had been severed at the wrist during an unsuccessful foray into North Africa. He had never, to Aichele's knowledge, discussed his reasons for going there or what, exactly, had transpired. Rumor was that the native practitioners of Arturo's craft—who prospered in the colonial regime, since it filled their streets with a cornucopia of gawking, slow-witted Frenchmen—were not about to share

their good fortune with one of those same foreigners. They either denounced him to the authorities or themselves administered the usual punishment for petty theft. Whichever it was, Arturo did retrain his left hand to do, with the same remarkable dexterity, what his right had done, and Aichele had to admit feeling some small admiration for this accomplishment.

"I'm an innocent man, inspector. You know me. You've known me for years. I would never kill anyone. And I know you won't let this injustice pass. *Mon Dieu*, they will cut off my head if you don't stop them."

"They will certainly try," Aichele said. Then, laying eyes on a tall stool in front of an adjoining cell, he pulled it clattering across the floor and sat wearily down. As intriguing as the night was becoming, it was still late, and Aichele was not a young man.

Arturo launched into his story without prompting.

"You know the Passage Vendôme, inspector?"

"Yes."

"I was there, working the crowd where the passage joins Boulevard du Temple. Plenty of people are out now that the weather's turned. I spotted this big fellow—a big, tall, awk-

ward fellow—an obvious mark. He was all done up for a night on the town, and I confess to you here and now that I stole his pocketbook. It was like taking candy from a baby, and even less of a crime, I think it would be fair to say. I was making my way back into the passage, looking for a spot to clean out the pocketbook, when a heavy hand suddenly falls on my shoulder. It's a bone-chilling feeling, inspector, and I know it well. I'm pinched. Vassivière is the cop's name, and he's a stinker—everything by the book. So I know there'll be no mercy, but then I realize, how can he be after me for the pocketbook? The big oaf is long gone, and he didn't even know he'd been robbed, much less who did it. Vassivière says some lady has accused me of trying to snatch her handbag, which is ridiculous. You know the strongarm stuff isn't my style, inspector. But I can tell from the grin on Vassivière's face that I'm in for it. He starts to search me, and I tell him he's got no right, but he just laughs. And of course he finds the pocketbook, which has two hundred francs in it, at least. There are some business cards, too, and he takes one and reads it and says, 'Well, well, M. Courgeon, how's the mineral water business?' I'm about to say some-

thing back, when he notices something I didn't see. There's blood on the pocketbook, along the edge where it folds together. You can understand how I felt. My luck was really going sour. But that wasn't the end of it. There was a big uproar all of a sudden from farther back in the passage. People were shouting, 'Murder! Murder!' and Vassivière looked at me, and the blood on the pocketbook, and he put two and two together. The next thing I knew I was down here, charged with a capital crime."

Aichele and the jailer, who was standing nearby, both listened quietly.

"I'm innocent," Arturo reiterated. Then, fearing his protestations were insufficient, he tried another tack. "We're friends, aren't we, inspector?" "Friends?"

Arturo's eyes widened with alarm. "One could say that, *n'est-ce pas?* I mean, I never took it personally when you ran me in—which wasn't more than a time or two anyway. You had your job to do, and I had mine. We are both professionals. I would never hold it against you that you did your job. I always liked you, in fact."

This last comment went too far, and Aichele raised his hands in protest.

"Please," Arturo said, read-

ing too much into the gesture. "You can't just leave me here."

They were interrupted, just then, by the arrival of Inspector Leroux, whose appearance caused the jailer a certain degree of consternation.

"What do we have here?" Leroux said, his eyes darting back and forth between Aichele and the jailer. "Since when are members of the public given open access to our prisons?" The jailer's response was going to be inadequate, no matter what it was.

Aichele, still seated on the stool, intervened. "I asked permission of this man's superior to visit my old acquaintance—and very dear friend—Arturo, who finds himself confronted with a situation of life and death—his own, namely. The captain saw no harm in taking a few liberties with normal procedures."

"And by whose authority did he take these 'liberties'? Entrance to the Conciergerie is not granted on a captain's whim."

"No one's, in particular. But when I solve this case, inspector, and when M. Courgeon's murderer is put here in Arturo's place, there are any one of a dozen 'authorities' at the Préfecture who will gladly take credit for permitting my brief interview."

This was true enough, Le-roux knew. It was wise to let well enough alone where Aichele was concerned. He let out a frustrated sigh. "Open the cell," he said to the jailer, making the order extra curt so as to reclaim at least part of his authority.

Arturo withdrew fearfully from the cell door.

Aichele yawned. "And I'll be getting along to bed. There will be work to do in the morning."

Officer Vassivière did not go on duty until late the following afternoon. Aichele wanted to speak to him sooner, but the delay did give him a chance to have lunch with Mrs. Poll, his English friend and housekeeper. Once an actress, she was also an astute observer of the Paris theater, and to Aichele's relief she gave a favorable review to the latest production at the Théâtre de Cluny, for which he had already bought tickets.

It was three o'clock when Aichele encountered Officer Vassivière on the Boulevard du Temple. The gendarme was a rugged looking man, with a prominent forehead and square jaw that were rather paradoxically set off by the measured, patrician way he walked his beat, hands clasped behind his

back, glancing constantly from side to side.

"This case is simple," he told Aichele. His voice was gruff, and matched his looks. "A man is murdered in the course of a robbery, and by a stroke of luck the criminal is caught. Don't think for a moment that I underestimate the role of luck in police work; monsieur. If Arturo had made it a few steps farther and lost himself in the crowd, the crime would never have been solved."

"Arturo says he stole the pocketbook from a man who was very much alive both during and after the robbery."

"Yes. He was eager to confess to any number of misdemeanors. I suppose it was the first excuse he thought of."

"You know Arturo well?"

"He has a record. He is an habitué of the Passage Vendôme. I keep an eye on him."

"What about M. Courgeon? Had you seen him in the passage before?"

"No, not that I noticed."

"What was he doing there?"

"Drinking. At the Taverne Toussaint. He spent the evening with his two nephews."

"They left together?"

"They parted company at the tavern door. M. Courgeon went down the passage in the direction of Rue Béranger, encountering Arturo on the way."

Aichele and Vassivière passed a café, sidestepping the outdoor tables that edged in upon the sidewalk. They were set in anticipation of a warm day, but they were all empty. The temperature was falling short of expectations.

"Why," Aichele asked, "do you think Arturo would resort to murder to relieve a man of his pocketbook when he is capable of accomplishing the same thing with no more noticeable effect than a gentle bump?"

"You ask me to explain the criminal mind?"

"I suppose I do," Aichele said. "And cannot we assume that, lacking a history of unexplainable behavior, a criminal mind would be no more likely than anyone else's to act irrationally?"

"I don't know," Vassivière answered flatly.

"Have you asked yourself why, after committing a most uncharacteristic murder, and still in possession of the only piece of evidence linking him to the crime, Arturo then tried to snatch a woman's handbag?"

"I have, and the answer is clear enough. Arturo, like most criminals, is greedy and stupid."

They had come to the Passage Vendôme. Vassivière stopped, planning to leave

Aichele on the boulevard.

"I'm going into the passage, too," Aichele said.

"Whatever," Vassivière replied indifferently.

"Who was the woman?" Aichele asked after they had gone a few steps.

Vassivière was slow to answer. He stared at a ragged beggar, slouched against a wall, whose empty cup was both the cause for and the product of the scowl he aimed at each passerby.

"You do know whom I mean," Aichele said. "The woman who accused Arturo of trying to steal her handbag."

"Yes. What of her?"

"Had you ever seen her before?"

Vassivière did not break the slow rhythm of his stride, but his manner stiffened considerably.

"I have seen her in the passage on a few occasions."

"What is her name?"

"Lisette."

Aichele waited for more.

"About twenty-five years of age, average height, somewhat fat, dyes her hair jet black, favors gaudy dress, occupation questionable, at best. She walks with a limp—favoring her right leg—and exaggerates or suppresses this defect depending on the circumstances."

"And in spite of her 'ques-

tionable' occupation, you took her at her word when she accused Arturo?"

"You're saying I shouldn't have?"

"No. But I find her timing intriguing, to say the least."

"I have already told you, M. Aichele, I do not underestimate the role of luck in my work. When it is bad, I am resigned to it. When it is good, there is no need to question it. Now, I would like to continue my patrol alone."

"Of course," Aichele said, stopping. "Just one more thing. What time was it when you arrested Arturo?"

"Eleven thirty, exactly. The bell at Sainte Elizabeth's tolled as I examined the pocketbook."

"And M. Courgeon's body was discovered at the same time."

"A few minutes before, actually."

"Thank you, officer."

"It was nothing," Vassivière said, and left Aichele standing at the door of Taverne Tous-saint.

**T**he tavern consisted of a single room with rough-hewn tables and chairs arranged on either side of a central aisle. There was a counter along the end of the room opposite the doorway, made of vertical slats covered

with a thick, crusty coat of aged shellac. The countertop, however, was polished to a glassy sheen by years of wear.

The owners, man and wife, stood behind the counter. Neither was tall. The woman, especially, was almost hidden by the clutter of half empty liquor bottles and scores of mismatched glasses in front of them. They were wiping the glasses with grey, damp rags.

"The tavern is closed," the man said warily as Aichele shut the door behind him and approached the counter. The owners' taut expressions showed the strain of having spent the previous night being questioned by Inspector Leroux, and who knows who else, from the Préfecture.

"Mind if I have a brandy?" Aichele said. Without waiting for an answer, he turned over one of the glasses and poured himself two fingers of brandy. "Ah," he breathed in satisfaction, after the first swallow. He put a fifty centime piece on the counter. "I understand a certain M. Courgeon spent the last night of his life here in your establishment. I know the police have already asked you every conceivable question regarding the matter, but I must test your patience a bit longer."

"You're not a cop?" the woman said.



"No. I am Paul Aichele, a private investigator. I am here on behalf of a friend—named Arturo—whom I think you know. He has been wrongly accused of killing M. Courgeon."

"Wrongly accused?" The man let the rag in his hand fall to the countertop. "Arturo is a snake. He spies on his victims, waits until their backs are turned, then strikes. Men like him give decent establishments a bad name." He noticed Aichele's coin alongside his rag and scooped it into the pocket of his apron. "If you ask me, the sooner Arturo's head is sent to join his thieving hand, if you know what I mean, the better off we'll all be."

Aichele poured himself another drink and again placed a coin on the countertop. "So it is your opinion that Arturo killed M. Courgeon."

"Opinion? I am in agreement with the facts as established by the Paris police. That is not mere opinion."

"May I ask what puts you in such complete agreement?"

"Well, it was plain as day what Arturo and the girl were up to. They spent the whole evening here—at that table right there—searching among my customers for their next victim."

"What girl?" Aichele said.

The woman suddenly set

down the glass she was drying and folded her arms in front of her.

"What girl?" Aichele said again, looking back and forth between the two of them.

The woman set her jaw, and her lips tightened to a narrow slit. The man looked at her, then said, "Arturo never worked alone. The girl was with him, as usual."

"You say too much," the woman snapped.

The man dismissed her comment with a small wave of his hand. "We serve liquor," he said. "We provide pleasant surroundings." He gestured toward the room and, in doing so, unintentionally magnified its general shabbiness. "That is how we make our living. If the customers get it in their heads to rob one another, it's their business, as long as it happens outside our doors."

"I take it this was not the first time Arturo and the girl found their victim among your customers," Aichele said. Neither the man nor the woman would look him in the eye. "Of course, the results were not usually so gruesome," he added.

"They were not after M. Courgeon," the woman said quietly. She did not raise her eyes from the counter. There was a damp spot in front of her

which she wiped away with one swipe of her rag.

"But you don't know that," her husband said, as if reminding her of a point they had already argued. "And it's Courgeon who's dead, not the bricklayer."

"Arturo and the girl were planning to rob a bricklayer?" Aichele said.

"He said he was a bricklayer," the woman answered. "But you wouldn't know it from looking at his hands. The man hadn't done an honest day's work in his life. You could tell by his hands."

"But they were going to rob him."

"They're a crafty pair, monsieur. They eyeballed the 'bricklayer' for the better part of the evening. When it started to look like he'd had about as much to drink as he was going to, Arturo slipped out the door; to lie in wait in the passage, while the girl stayed here."

"And that's where you've got it wrong," her husband said. "Yes, Arturo did leave, but M. Courgeon and his nephews had also left only a few minutes before—just after eleven, as I remember. Arturo followed them, and when the opportunity arose, he killed M. Courgeon and took his money."

"So M. Courgeon left together with his nephews?"

"Yes, but the two of them went toward Boulevard du Temple. I saw them through the glass. And Arturo could have seen, too, from where he and the girl were sitting. He knew M. Courgeon was going alone toward Rue Béranger."

"You saw Arturo follow M. Courgeon?"

The man tilted his head thoughtfully to one side. "No, I can't say I actually saw him, but it's obvious he did."

"How long was it between the time M. Courgeon left and the time the bricklayer left?" Aichele asked.

"Fifteen minutes, perhaps a bit less," the man said, and his wife did not disagree.

"And what did the girl do during that time?"

"She continued to sip at the one drink she bought all evening."

"And after the bricklayer left?"

"She put down her drink and followed him," the woman said, giving her husband a look. "I've seen it before. When the mark gets near the boulevard, where there's more of a crowd, she creates some distraction that takes the victim's attention while Arturo picks his pocket. But as my husband said, monsieur, that is neither our concern nor our responsibility."

"Were M. Courgeon and his

nephews regular customers?" Aichele asked.

"No," the man said. "But they weren't keeping any secrets. They were out to enjoy themselves. M. Courgeon was taking his nephews under his wing, into his company. He bought several rounds of drinks, in honor of L'Eau Minéral Courgeon. I have a bottle here." He held up a clear, thick-walled bottle. Its label was wet and had slipped sideways.

"Was Arturo's accomplice a young woman named Lisette?" Aichele asked.

The man set the bottle down with a clunk. "You know more than you let on, monsieur."

"A trick of the trade," Aichele said. "She dyes her hair, at least that's my opinion."

"It's rather obvious," the woman agreed.

"Where can I find her?"

"Who knows?" the man said. "She must have a room somewhere, but I don't know where. I suppose if you waited here long enough she would turn up."

"I'm afraid that would be a long wait," Aichele said.

It was time for the evening meal when Aichele returned to the Conciergerie. Arturo sat on the floor, eating a stew from a tin bowl he held between his knees.

"They tried to make me confess last night," he said after he set the bowl aside and hopped to his feet. "But I resisted."

"They think it's easier that way," Aichele said. He offered Arturo a cigarette, which was eagerly accepted. "I just came from Taverne Toussaint."

"Oh?" Arturo strained to produce a tone of innocent curiosity.

"The owner made a remark which was in very poor taste, but which might well come true."

"What did he say?"

"He said he would be happy when your head was sent to join your thieving hand."

Arturo went very pale.

"You did not exactly tell me the truth of what happened last night, did you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were in the Taverne Toussaint with a young woman named Lisette, planning to rob a bricklayer. This was, I assume, the 'big fellow' you spoke of."

Arturo pulled himself quickly to the bars of the door with his one hand. "Courgeon was in the Taverne Toussaint. If the police find out I was there . . ."

"They already know."

Arturo slumped against the bars.

"Lisette must be kept out of

it. I had nothing to do with Courgeon's death—and she even less."

"She's worked with you before?"

"A few times."

"Why would she denounce you to Vassivière?"

"What?"

"She was the woman who reported to Vassivière that you tried to steal her handbag."

"Impossible. She was right there when I stole the pocketbook."

"And, as usual, you went your separate ways, without acknowledging one another, you slowly toward Rue Bé-ranger, and she along the Boulevard du Temple, where she knew she would quickly find Vassivière that time of night."

Arturo turned away from the bars and then, with a look which was half smile and half grimace, said, "I'm not surprised, in a way."

"No honor among thieves, eh?" Aichele said. "I'll try to find her. I don't see any harm in it."

"No harm in it?" Arturo exclaimed. "Is that a joke? You've got to find her. She's the key, isn't she? I wouldn't be here if she hadn't turned me in."

"No, you would not."

"She has a room at 44 Rue Rampon, in a boarding house. Take the tramway up Sébasto-

pol, change at Rue de Turbigo...."

"I'll catch a taxi," Aichele said and then added, reassuringly, "it will be quicker."

The rooming house at 44 Rue Rampon consisted of three floors of decrepit apartments, bunched around a creaky central staircase. It was chilly, and the concierge wore a coat over her housedress and a wool scarf wrapped around her head and neck.

Aichele asked if there was a Mlle. Lisette among her roomers.

She scowled suspiciously and told him her list of tenants was a private matter. The tenfranc note Aichele then produced transformed it into a public one.

"Room Seventeen," she said. "But you won't find her there. She came in very late last night and packed her things and left. I've seen it before, you know. She's paid up through the end of the week, but we won't be seeing her again, ever."

"I would like to look at her room," Aichele said.

The concierge folded the tenfranc note and slipped it into a pocket under her coat, implying that another was expected. Aichele stared firmly at her. After a moment, she retreated into her room and then

emerged with the passkey.

The room was small, windowless, and needed a new coat of paint. A framed print, cut from a magazine, hung on the wall. Beneath it was a small table covered by a yellowed lace cloth. There was a wilted bouquet of daffodils in a jar at its center.

A double-doored wardrobe occupied most of the remaining space. Its contents were spread across the narrow bed, where it could be seen from their disarray that they had been hastily picked through. The colors and patterns were all garish. A red scarf, with gold fleurs-des-lis, lay atop the pile. Aichele took it in his hand, folded it a few times, and put it in his pocket. The concierge watched without a word. He took a final look around the room and left.

**A**n uncompromising chill gripped the city the next morning, oblivious to the Parisians' fervent hopes that it give way and allow spring to begin. The mood was doubly sombre in the offices of L'Eau Mineral Courgeon, where the cold underscored the gloom brought on by the tragic death of the company's owner and founder.

The bottling plant, which occupied the rear two-thirds of the building, seemed to func-

tion at half speed. The clank of metal against glass was somehow hushed as normal spring water from Vichy was transferred from casks to the small bottles which were then corked and affixed with the company label. In the front office, only M. Beaugé, the late M. Courgeon's secretary, was on duty. The other two clerks had been sent home for the remainder of the week.

M. Beaugé's desk was in the center of the outer office, from which a corridor led to several other offices and, eventually, to the bottling plant. Nathan Courgeon, the elder of the two Courgeon cousins who had assumed control of the company, was in his uncle's office, going through the desk and file cabinets, taking stock of the company's resources. The office was to be his own. His cousin Nicolas would eventually be installed in one of the smaller rooms down the corridor. Nicolas, who had no head for finances, would familiarize himself with the bottling plant, while Nathan would handle the more esoteric bookkeeping and administrative chores.

At the moment, Nicolas was at the Préfecture de Police, having been summoned there by a gendarme earlier in the morning. The request from Inspector Leroux for an addi-

tional interview caused an exchange of puzzled looks between the two cousins. But Nathan sent Nicolas off with an encouraging pat on the back, and the observation that police investigations were complex undertakings, and such things were to be expected.

Nathan had just begun scanning the columns of figures in one of the three account ledgers when he heard an excited, unfamiliar voice from the front office. He opened the door and looked out to see M. Beaugé being confronted by an older, thoroughly dandified man whose starched collar was too high and too tight, infusing his face with a constant flush. A gigantic white rose was pinned to his lapel.

"Ah! M. Courgeon?" the visitor said, sidestepping M. Beaugé and thrusting his hand toward Nathan. "Please, do pardon the interruption—I could return later if you'd like—but I always insist on meeting our new customers personally."

Nathan stared at the effusive, smiling man, not bothering to try to place him.

"My card, sir." The man presented a cream-colored card from Laferrière, one of the city's most expensive dress-makers. "We had the great pleasure yesterday of assisting

your, er, bride-to-be in the selection of a wardrobe that will, if I do say so myself, place her among our leading ladies of fashion."

"My 'bride-to-be'? I'm sorry, monsieur..." Nathan looked down at the card. "... M. Rousseau. There has been a mistake. I am a confirmed bachelor."

M. Rousseau was taken aback. He drew a paper from his pocket and unfolded it. "These are the offices of L'Eau Mineral Courgeon, are they not? And you are M. Courgeon."

"Yes, but..."

"A young woman visited our establishment yesterday afternoon and ordered the merchandise you see itemized here." He held the paper so Nathan could read it. The figure under "amount due" was nothing less than breathtaking.

"She instructed us to deliver the bill here," M. Rousseau continued. "To you, at these offices. There is the clerk's notation."

At the bottom of the page was written: *Nicolas Courgeon, L'Eau Mineral Courgeon, 105 Ave. de la République.*

"I am Nathan Courgeon. Nicolas Courgeon is my cousin."

M. Rousseau drew the paper quickly to his face, practically touching it to his nose. Then, pulling it away with a jerk, he

said, "Of course. Of course. How stupid of me! I had assumed, having asked for M. Courgeon . . . well, no wonder you looked so surprised. My apologies, monsieur. My sincerest apologies." A brief, stiff smile crossed his face. "But perhaps I can leave the bill here with you? If you would be so kind, could you make sure it is brought to M. Nicolas Courgeon's attention."

Nathan took the paper from M. Rousseau's hand. "I will be happy to." He turned and started down the corridor to his office.

"And," called out M. Rousseau, "tell monsieur that mademoiselle is welcome to pick up the merchandise as soon as full payment is made."

Nathan nodded silently. He was already composing in his mind a very stern lecture for his cousin. He returned to the task of exploring the ledger books and the correspondence that filled the drawers of his late uncle's desk. Within a few moments he was pleasantly absorbed in determining the precise degree of L'Eau Mineral Courgeon's profitability.

After a time, he heard someone enter the front office. He assumed it was Nicolas and cleared off the desk in preparation for taking his cousin to task for his thoughtlessness.

No one came, however, and at last he heard the outer door slam shut so emphatically that he went to see for himself what the explanation was.

"A young lady to see your cousin," M. Beaugé said. "I told her he was not in but that you were, and that you could perhaps be of some assistance." Beaugé frowned. "That seemed to frighten her off." He scratched at his receding hairline. "She did have a note prepared, for M. Nicolas."

An envelope was lying on the edge of M. Beaugé's desk. Nathan picked it up.

"I'll see that Nicolas gets this," he said.

"She forgot her scarf, too. She really did seem quite agitated, monsieur."

Nathan stared at the red and gold scarf. "I'm not surprised," he said. Then he returned to his office.

His hands trembled as he slit the envelope with a letter opener. He began reading with a certain amusement, as if he were privy to some private farce. But this feeling quickly deserted him, to be replaced in turn by contempt and then a smoldering anger. The note read:

*Mon cher Nicolas,  
I have been gravely insulted. They told me at the*



*Hôtel Windsor that there were no rooms available when I knew very well there were. As Mme. Nicolas Courgeon, I will not have to endure such snubs, but that makes them no less painful now. We must make certain, someday, to go there together, so I can rub a particular desk clerk's nose in it. I am now at the Hôtel du Tibre, on Rue du Helder, Rm. 116, where I will await your visit. We have a luncheon appointment with the man I mentioned to you earlier. His fee is one thousand francs, which you will need to bring along, as we must pay in advance.*

*Your loving fiancée,  
Lisette*

*P.S. A gentleman from Laferrière will be calling at the office today. Please pay him, as my present wardrobe is entirely unsuited for a lady of my station.*

Nathan's hands stopped trembling. He took his watch from his vest pocket and checked the time. It was barely eleven. He refolded the letter, slipped it back into the envelope, and dropped it into his top desk drawer.

\* \* \*

The Hôtel du Tibre was large, consisting of over two hundred rooms. But its prices were moderate, and it attracted a thoroughly middle-class clientele. One could slip in or out of the Hôtel du Tibre completely unnoticed, simply by affecting the dress and mannerisms of the average businessman, and that was precisely what Nathan Courgeon had done. He arrived at Room 116 having left no impression whatsoever on either the staff or guests he encountered along the way.

He rapped softly on the door. Footsteps approached, and then a hushed voice said, "Nicolas?"

"Yes," he answered in a whisper.

There was a click as the key turned in the lock. Nathan waited for the knob to turn, but it did not move. The footsteps were drawing away. He opened the door in time to catch a glimpse of a woman's back, covered by a cascade of black hair, and a slight rolling motion to her walk as she disappeared behind a dressing screen at the far end of the room.

"I've caught cold, *mon cher*," she said. "Isn't that ridiculous." Her voice was distorted by the stuffiness of her nose. She laid her dressing gown over the top of the screen, and from the occasional bumps against it, Na-

than could tell she was putting on her clothes.

"You're early," she said. "Our luncheon isn't until one thirty."

He cupped one hand to his mouth and coughed.

"You aren't catching cold, too?"

"Yes," he said slowly, listening to the sound of his own voice. "I'm afraid I am."

"Well, I have wonderful news," she went on, paying no attention to what he had said. "The gentleman we are meeting is very well spoken of in certain circles, and he agrees with me that Nathan's death definitely must be accidental—I mean, appear to be an accident. After all, two murders in the same family within such a short time might look suspicious. Such a thing can be arranged, of course, but we must be patient. But won't it be a fine day when it comes? We'll have a party—oh dear—perhaps not. It wouldn't look right, would it."

Nathan stood in the center of the room, not moving, staring in growing bemusement at the screen, and the tropical seascape embroidered upon its panels.

"Nicolas, are you still there?"

"Yes." Nathan was no longer self-conscious about the sound of his voice. He drew a rust-spotted kitchen knife from under his coat.

The woman's dulled, nasal sounding voice prattled on. "There is one thing I've been thinking about, *mon cher*. In fact, I have to say I'm somewhat worried. It's not that I underestimate you, but you and your cousin are, well, such novices. You did dispose of the knife properly, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Nathan looked down at the knife in his hand, and he could not help smiling. The blade caught a faint reflection of light from the window curtains. "What knife?" he said, baiting the voice behind the screen.

"The knife you killed your uncle with," she said with a laugh, taking his question as a joke.

"We hid it under some rubble, near the body, where the police would be sure to find it."

"Excellent, *mon cher*. I should have known better than to doubt you."

Nathan had taken several silent steps in the direction of the screen. When he was close enough to touch it, he reached out with his left hand. The knife was poised in his right.

But the screen tipped suddenly toward him and fell to the floor. He stepped nimbly and calmly aside, setting himself to intercept Lisette as she fled for her life. Indeed, a woman was there, but she stood still, staring impassively at him. She was no one he had ever seen before.

Two men were crouched to one side of her, each with a pistol aimed at Nathan's chest. He recognized one as Inspector Leroux. The other took longer, but he finally realized it was the salesman from Laferrière.

"You've given yourself away, M. Courgeon," Leroux said as he straightened up. "We did in fact find the murder weapon exactly where you just said it was. And I think that when we present your little gaffe to Nicolas he will be inclined to enlighten us further regarding your uncle's murder. After all, he's been sitting in a room all by himself at the Préfecture—waiting. And he certainly doesn't know what for. You would be amazed at the effect that has on a guilty man."

The knife in Nathan's hand slipped from his fingers and fell to the carpet with a soft thud. Only then did Leroux and Aichele lower their weapons.

**U**pon his release from the Conciergerie, Aichele's grateful, but destitute, one-armed client offered as payment whatever "favor" it was within his power to grant. Aichele accepted and in complete seriousness told Arturo that the next time he wanted someone's pocket picked, he would call upon him.

Mrs. Poll kept the black wig she wore at the Hôtel du Tibre, but as a souvenir, not a functional accessory. Aichele kept M. Rousseau's white rose in the same spirit. It looked best in a vase on the mantel.

Mrs. Poll also took Aichele up on his offer to buy breakfast at the Hôtel Rivoli. He was content with his coffee and croissant while she dispatched a weighty English breakfast which was the hotel's specialty.

"You were so sure it was M. Courgeon's nephews who killed him," Mrs. Poll said between bites.

"Well—sure enough to give Nathan the chance to think his cousin and Lisette had betrayed him."

"Don't equivocate. You were absolutely certain."

Aichele set his cup down and gave a little shrug of pretended modesty. "It was obvious from the start that Arturo was not the killer. He was arrested at eleven thirty. M. Courgeon and his nephews left the Taverne Toussaint just after eleven. This meant—if Arturo was the guilty one—that he committed the crime and then lingered in the passage for at least twenty minutes, with M. Courgeon's bloody pocketbook in hand. The Arturo I know would join the ranks of honest laborers before making such a gross error. Un-

fortunately for the cousins Courgeon, if one eliminates Arturo, the only remaining suspects are themselves."

"Really? Not the bricklayer?"

"He remained in the tavern for almost fifteen minutes after the Courgeons left. Even walking slowly, M. Courgeon would have been well onto Rue Bé-ranger while the bricklayer was finishing his last drink."

"And the nephews?"

"Who else had the chance to steal M. Courgeon's pocketbook and then pass it on to the bricklayer?"

"Anyone. The Passage Vendôme is full of rogues."

"But who among them would kill a man for a pocketbook full of money and then give it away?"

"I see," said Mrs. Poll.

"The killer—or killers—had to be someone with more to gain than a few hundred francs."

"Enter Nathan and Nicolas."

"Precisely. The fifteen minutes between the Courgeons' exit from the tavern and the bricklayer's departure was when the cousins—after making a show of leaving in the direction of Boulevard du Temple—doubled back unseen, did

in their uncle, and then slipped his pocketbook to the bricklayer as he emerged from the tavern door."

"Which means the bricklayer was part of the plot," Mrs. Poll said.

"And so was Lisette. She made sure Arturo chose the bricklayer as that night's victim. Only this time it was the pickpocket, not his mark, who fell into a trap."

"Have they confessed to their roles?"

"They have not been caught. We are a city of two and a half million, after all."

"And if a certain inspector were still on the force?"

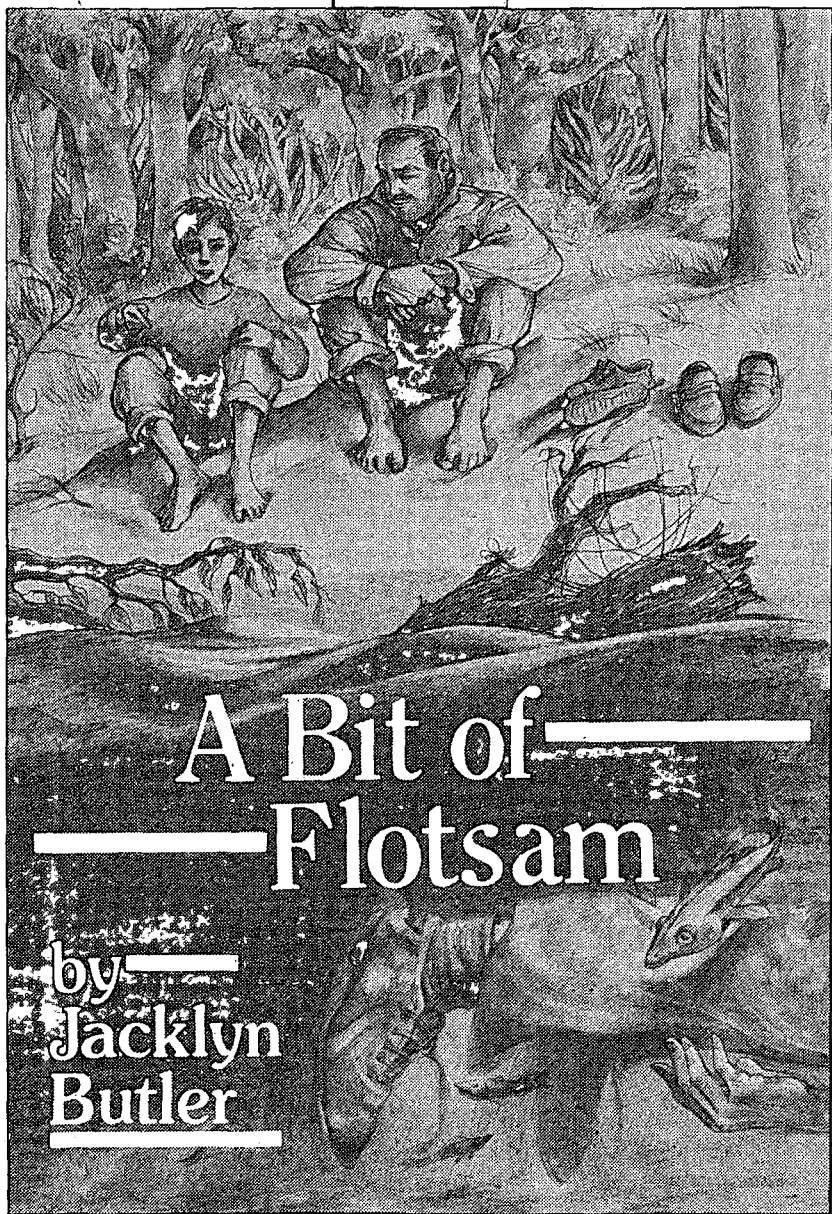
"Who knows?" Aichele said, then added, to change the subject, "We do owe a debt to Nathan Courgeon's good sense."

"How do you mean?"

"He came to the Hôtel du Tibre prepared to do away with Lisette soundlessly—with a knife. What if he had put a pistol shot through her dressing screen?"

"Indeed," said Mrs. Poll, her aplomb unruffled, except that she had broken the slice of toasted bread she was buttering cleanly in half in the palm of her hand.





# A Bit of — — Flotsam

by —  
Jacklyn  
Butler

---

---

I stood and watched birds forage in the shallows of Lake Michigan while a policeman talked to the kid. The afternoon sun was warm, but I was glad I'd worn my windbreaker. The breeze blowing off the lake was full of fish and rotting wood. The cop wasn't getting anywhere; a good fifteen minutes of hand-waving jawboning and the boy kept shaking his head. My job would start after he admitted defeat.

I'd just been hired as the psychologist for a suburban school system. The president of the school board came to see me while I was moving into my office. I expected him to question me about my plans for the fall quarter, but instead he presented me with a personal problem concerning his son.

"Business is off this year anyhow," he'd explained to me. He owns and runs one of the large hotels on the north beach. "Our resort has been about forty, forty-five percent occupied. Worst season in years. I need rumors of a body washed up on the beach like I need another hole in my head."

He described how he had tried to reason with his son. First he asked him to admit he just made it up. "I know you're not tellin' a real lie," he'd told the kid. "It's just a fantasy like any of us would think up after a day all alone on the beach. A dream, like."

"But I didn't make it up," the boy said. "And it wasn't a dream."

"So you were mistaken. A lot of people will be better off if you admit it."

"I wasn't mistaken."

"Just say you aren't sure."

The kid insisted he *was* sure. He'd seen a body in the water near the shore. He knew it would come back.

"I could never get him to change his mind, even when he was little enough to spank," his father admitted. "He's hopeless when he gets his back up."

So I had a chance to show what I could do. It was up to me to make friends with this kid, get him to trust me, and talk him into backing down so the local papers could announce it was all a hoax in time to save the Labor Day rush to the beach resorts.

Finally the cop gave up and walked over to me.

"You the shrink?" he asked. He was a young fellow, new on the job like I was. "He's not gonna budge. He insists he saw it, and he's gonna sit there until it comes back so he can prove it."

"Is there any possibility he's telling the truth?" I asked.

"No way. We haven't had a drowning reported in over a month."

If there is a corpse, it'll cost more'n it's worth to identify what's left. Another John Doe to get rid of." The police didn't need a body, either. "That kid made it all up because he needs attention." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the boy. "You really think you can talk him into admitting he lied?"

"That's my job," I said.

"Lots of luck."

I watched the boy a while longer. He was thirteen years old, short and skinny. Probably had always been the littlest kid in his class, the one left out when they chose up sides, so he'd learned to play alone and he'd learned to be tough. He sat on a dune and took off his sneakers and socks, walked through the warm sand down to the edge of the lake, where the tiny waves broke and receded and left patches of sand slick. East winds carry warm surface water to the edge; the lake is like a warm bath on days like this, but when his foot touched the water the kid drew back like it was cracked ice, or maybe too hot.

He walked back and sat on a dune, and I walked over and stood beside him. The wind and the surf made enough noise so he didn't hear me until I spoke; he let out a little yip and drew away. He was scared, all right. Defensive.

"I didn't make it up," he said right away.

I sat down beside him. "I'd like to be here when it comes back."

I was the first person who seemed to believe him. After a few minutes of silence he decided to trust me a little. "It might come today," he said. I could read his mind. He couldn't back down after all this, he believed the story himself. He waded down the beach, toward a little inlet. "See that log? It washed up close to shore five different times. I counted. Finally it got stuck."

"Wind's right today. Lots of stuff blowing in," I said. I began to take off my own shoes. "You picked a good spot here. We can run in and grab it before the next wave breaks." I rolled my slacks up a couple turns.

"I—I got scared, the first time," he admitted. "At first I thought it was just some junk washing up. When I saw what it was, I shoulda grabbed it, pulled it up on the beach a little. But I've never touched a dead body."

"I would've been scared, too," I told him. I put my shoes beside his.

"I'll know what to do next time," he said.

We stared at the edge of the lake while the sun moved behind



us toward Iowa and Kansas. Little sailboats and a few big yachts headed for home and it got colder; the kid would get tired of his game before long. Just before five o'clock a white Mercedes parked up on the road, and a woman came down the steps and walked toward us through the dunes. She looked familiar. She was dressed in designer beach stuff, her earrings were huge anchors that looked like real gold. Probably staying in the new Inn at two hundred a day, or maybe owned one of the big private homes farther up the beach. Before she got to us, a man arrived in a black Cadillac and followed her down the stairs. He looked familiar, too, a little too heavy but his blue linen suit fit perfectly and his red tie was pure silk. By the time they got close, I knew I'd never met either of them, they just reminded me of a whole lot of people I don't like. The man spoke first.

"Has it come back yet?" His voice was deep and resonant.

"Not yet," I said.

"It will," the kid said.

Close up, the lady was tanned and skinny. Under her hat her hair looked dry; she'd spent a lot of time sailing, swimming, and sunning herself. "I've been praying ever since I read about it in the paper," she said, and her voice rasped; her throat must have been as dry as her hair. "My husband disappeared about six months ago."

"You're afraid this might be his body?" I asked, watching the boy. He wasn't a bad kid. Maybe he'd back down on his story if he saw somebody getting hurt.

"I wish it were," she snapped. "It's unlikely that he'd drown himself. He managed to take most of our money. Left me a virtual pauper. I expect he's started a new life somewhere. But there's an insurance policy waiting for me to prove he's dead."

The man's voice rumbled again; I could tell he had trained it to cajole juries.

"I'm here on behalf of a client," he said. "Her husband disappeared, too, just a couple of weeks ago."

I realized who he was. There'd been a lot in the papers about it. "You're talking about the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Franley?" I suggested.

The man nodded. "Yes. Mr. Franley."

"Mrs. Franley is the one who is shackled up with the family lawyer, isn't she?" I asked. The man bobbed his head toward the boy, as if a thirteen-year-old wouldn't know about things like that.

"I can see how important it is to your client," I continued. "She needs proof of death so she can marry her lover."

"I've told her that this is all a hoax . . ."

"No, it isn't!" The kid spoke quickly. "It'll be back. Then you'll see!"

We sat and watched the waters and waited for nothing to happen. I couldn't reason with the kid while these two hung around, but I didn't think it was all bad. I could tell he didn't like them either, so maybe they'd do some of my work for me.

After a while a man approached from the south. His shirt was buttoned up, his tie tucked safely into the vest of his three piece suit; those shiny shoes had never touched sand before. He introduced himself as a counselor at one of the medical schools in Chicago.

"One of our students is missing," he said. "I had a premonition when I saw the story in the paper this morning." The doctor stopped, embarrassed. "I'm broadminded on the whole. But medicine is a profession; we have to maintain some kind of standards. Mohawk styles! And now green hair. That's going too far." He turned to the kid. "Was the body a young man, about one sixty pounds?"

"Don't know," the kid said. "Didn't see any green hair."

"I suppose the dye might wash out." The doctor smoothed his own wind-rumpled hair with both hands. "I know that Joseph has no close family. I should have considered that before I threatened to recommend expulsion." He looked at the lake. "Hasn't sent for his clothes or books . . ."

As we let the waves hypnotize us, I knew I was the only one who even remembered the kid was present.

"It seems to me you hope the body is not your Joseph," the lady said.

"Well, Joseph has no wife or mother staying awake nights wondering what happened to him." He sighed. "But I felt I had to investigate."

The lady went on. "In that case, why not just go away? If the body does come back, and it's my husband's, everything will be fine. If it's Joseph's, I'll just claim it anyhow. I doubt they'll question my identification."

The doctor hesitated. "I'd hate to leave Joe without a decent burial . . ."

"Oh, I'll see that he has a decent burial. I'll even say a little

prayer for him at the funeral if that's the way it goes."

The doctor hesitated. "I could never lie, but if I never knew . . . everybody would benefit. . . . Don't forget, a decent burial." He hurried off.

"Aren't you afraid your husband might come back if he hears you've declared him dead?" I asked.

"Hah! I wish he would come back. I'd love to go through a real divorce. When I tell a judge how that monster made me suffer, I'll get everything he has."

"You and I seem to be the only ones who are interested in that kid's story," the attorney said.

"What can I do to persuade you to leave the field to me?" the lady asked.

"What do you offer?" he asked.

"This is no time to be funny," she chided, smiling into his eyes.

"Of course," he said. "I hope my client's husband is alive and well and on his way home."

"How come?" I asked him. "I thought *you* were particularly anxious to help her clear up her marital status . . ."

"Not exactly." He nudged me with his elbow. "Sometimes the game loses its kick when you realize it's not a game."

"Well!" The lady opened her hands out, palms up, as if everything was settled. "All you have to do is follow the other gentleman off the beach."

"I don't think you can get away with it." The attorney turned to me. "Can't the police make absolute identification nowadays? DNA, dental records, stuff like that?"

"They only do that if nobody claims the corpse," I said. "It's easier and cheaper to let somebody identify a body."

"Hey!" the kid shouted and suddenly started to run toward the lake. "I told you!" he shouted over his shoulder as he ran. "I didn't make it up!"

I was right behind him—splashing into the water with him. We each grabbed at an arm, and the "body," a tree limb with old clothes, a piece of tire, rope, garbage stuck to it, came apart in our hands. Rotting fish drifted off with the rest of the junk.

"I don't see how you could be so blind." The lady was standing on the edge of the breakers. A wave broke over her sandals, gold thongs attached to soles made of coiled rope. "Anyone could see it was just a pile of flotsam."

I felt sorry for the kid. I stayed around to talk to him while the

others strolled off; the attorney to tell his "client" that everything remained as it always had, and the lady to fret because she couldn't take all the trips she wanted.

"Sure did look like a real body," I said, picking up my shoes. "Fooled me completely. I ran in after it—right up to my knees!" I unrolled my slacks to show how wet they were. He sat silently, unmoving; he was wiped out. "You see, it's really all for the best that you didn't find a body," I said. "Your father will be happy when we tell him." I detected a slight nod. "Come on, let's go talk to your dad."

He shook his head. "I'll stay here awhile," he said.

It had become absolutely quiet on the beach. That time of day, those stiff east winds die just before the wind from the west picks up. "It's getting dark," I warned him.

"I know. I'll have to go to dinner." I doubted he had much appetite, but he'd get cold. He'd go inside soon.

His father was delighted.

"I can't thank you enough," he said, giving me full credit.

"Just be sure not to rub it in," I warned him. "He'll be sensitive about it."

"Oh, I'll be careful. Where is he, anyhow?"

"I guess he's still down on the beach. I'll stop by, send him home."

When I got to the edge of the beach, I climbed up on one of the dunes to look for the kid. I had a shot of fear when I saw him running pell-mell toward the lake. I started to run after him, but I stopped when I saw that he was pulling something out of the water. He had an arm, hauled a body up to the edge of the beach.

He'd said he'd know what to do this time, so I waited for a minute to give him a chance to prove to himself that he wasn't a coward. He reached down and touched a cheek. Then he put his whole thirteen years on the line, gave a big heave that sent it out into deeper water.

The wind from the west had sprung up by then, the kind that gives Chicago its nickname. Blows everything, smog, junk, away. When I shouted to him to stop, my words were lost.

There was no sign of a body when I got there.

"Probably will wash up in Michigan someday," the kid said. He hesitated for a second, then reached for my hand.



# FULFILL YOUR NIGHTMARES

Enjoy chilling tales  
of mystery and suspense.  
Sometimes humorous, sometimes  
nightmarish. But always an  
intriguing puzzle.



## AND SAVE 29%!

☐ Please send me 18 issues of **ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE** for \$25.95—I save 29% off the basic price.

☐ Please send me 12 issues of **ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE** for \$18.95—I save 25% off the basic price.

Mail to: **ALFRED HITCHCOCK**  
P.O. Box 7055  
Red Oak, IA 51591

OR CALL 1-800-333-3311

- ☐ Payment Enclosed  
☐ Bill Me  
☐ Charge (Circle One)



Card # \_\_\_\_\_

Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ ST \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Outside U.S. & Possessions, 12 for \$22.95,  
18 for \$31.95. Please allow 6-8 weeks for  
delivery of your first issues. Includes GST.

We publish two double issues, in June and Mid-December.  
Each double issues counts as two towards your subscription.

HASC-2

# MYSTERY CLASSIC



## The Carol Singers by Josephine Bell

Illustration by Laurie Davis

118

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Old Mrs. Fairlands stepped carefully off the low chair she had pulled close to the fireplace. She was very conscious of her eighty-one years every time she performed these mild acrobatics. Conscious of it and determined to have no humiliating, potentially dangerous mishap. But obstinate, in her persistent routine of dusting her own mantelpiece, where a great many too many photographs and small ornaments daily gathered a film of greasy London dust.

Mrs. Fairlands lived in the ground floor flat of a converted house in a once fashionable row of early Victorian family homes. The house had been in her family for three generations before her, and she herself had been born and brought up there. In those faroff days of her childhood, the whole house was filled with a busy throng of people, from the top floor where the nurseries housed the noisiest and liveliest group, through the dignified, low-voiced activities of her parents and resident aunt on the first and ground floors, to the basement haunts of the domestic staff, the kitchens and the cellars.

Too many young men of the family had died in two world wars and too many young women had married and left the house to make its original use in the late 1940's any longer possible. Mrs. Fairlands, long a widow, had inherited the property when the last of her brothers died. She had let it for a while, but even that failed. A conversion was the obvious answer. She was a vigorous seventy at the time, fully determined, since her only child, a married daughter, lived in the to her barbarous wastes of the Devon moors, to continue to live alone with her much-loved familiar possessions about her.

The conversion was a great success and was made without very much structural alteration to the house. The basement, which had an entrance by the former back door, was shut off and was let to a businessman who spent only three days a week in London and preferred not to use an hotel. The original hall remained as a common entrance to the other three flats. The ground floor provided Mrs. Fairlands with three large rooms, one of which was divided into a kitchen and bathroom. Her own front door was the original dining room door from the hall. It led now into a narrow passage, also chopped off from the room that made the bathroom and kitchen. At the end of the passage two new doors led into the former morning room, her drawing room as she liked to call it, and her bedroom, which had been the study.

This drawing room of hers was at the front of the house, overlook-



ing the road. It had a square bay window that gave her a good view of the main front door and the steps leading up to it, the narrow front garden, now a paved forecourt, and from the opposite window of the bay, the front door and steps of the house next door, divided from her by a low wall.

Mrs. Fairlands, with characteristic obstinacy, strength of character, integrity, or whatever other description her forceful personality drew from those about her, had lived in her flat for eleven years, telling everyone that it suited her perfectly and feeling, as the years went by, progressively more lonely, more deeply bored, and more consciously apprehensive. Her daily came for four hours three times a week. It was enough to keep the place in good order. On those days the admirable woman cooked Mrs. Fairlands a good solid English dinner, which she shared, and also constructed several more main meals that could be eaten cold or warmed up. But three half days of cleaning and cooking left four whole days in each week when Mrs. Fairlands must provide for herself or go out to the High Street to a restaurant. After her eightieth birthday she became more and more reluctant to make the effort. But every week she wrote to her daughter Dorothy to say how well she felt and how much she would detest leaving London, where she had lived all her life except when she was evacuated to Wiltshire in the second war.

She was sincere in writing thus. The letters were true as far as they went, but they did not go the whole distance. They did not say that it took Mrs. Fairlands nearly an hour to wash and dress in the morning. They did not say she was sometimes too tired to bother with supper and then had to get up in the night, feeling faint and thirsty, to heat herself some milk. They did not say that although she stuck to her routine of dusting the whole flat every morning, she never mounted her low chair without a secret terror that she might fall and break her hip and perhaps be unable to reach the heavy stick she kept beside her armchair to use as a signal to the flat above.

On this particular occasion, soon after her eighty-first birthday, she had deferred the dusting until late in the day, because it was Christmas Eve and in addition to cleaning the mantelpiece she had arranged on it a pile of Christmas cards from her few remaining friends and her many younger relations.

This year, she thought sadly, there was really not much point in making the display. Dorothy and Hugh and the children could not

come to her as usual, nor could she go to them. The tiresome creatures had chicken pox, in their late teens, too, except for Bobbie, the afterthought, who was only ten. They should all have had it years ago, when they first went to school. So the visit was canceled, and though she offered to go to Devon instead, they told her she might get shingles from the same infection and refused to expose her to the risk. Apart altogether from the danger to her of traveling at that particular time of the year, the weather and the holiday crowds combined, Dorothy had written.

Mrs. Fairlands turned sadly from the fireplace and walked slowly to the window. A black Christmas this year, the wireless report had promised. As black as the prospect of two whole days of isolation at a time when the whole western world was celebrating its midwinter festival and Christians were remembering the birth of their faith.

She turned from the bleak prospect outside her window, a little chilled by the downdraft seeping through its closed edges. Near the fire she had felt almost too hot, but then she needed to keep it well stocked up for such a large room. In the old days there had been logs, but she could no longer lift or carry logs. Everyone told her she ought to have a cosy stove or even do away with solid fuel altogether, install central heating and perhaps an electric fire to make a pleasant glow. But Mrs. Fairlands considered these suggestions defeatist, an almost insulting reference to her age. Secretly she now thought of her life as a gamble with time. She was prepared to take risks for the sake of defeating them. There were few pleasures left to her. Defiance was one of them.

When she left the window, she moved to the far corner of the room, near the fireplace. Here a small table, usually covered, like the mantelpiece, with a multitude of objects, had been cleared to make room for a Christmas tree. It was mounted in a large bowl reserved for this annual purpose. The daily had set it up for her and wrapped the bowl round with crinkly red paper, fastened with safety pins. But the tree was not yet decorated.

Mrs. Fairlands got to work upon it. She knew that it would be more difficult by artificial light to tie the knots in the black cotton she used for the dangling glass balls. Dorothy had provided her with some newfangled strips of pliable metal that needed only to be threaded through the rings on the glass balls and wrapped round the branches of the tree. But she had tried these strips only once. The metal had slipped from her hands and the ball had fallen

and shattered. She went back to her long practiced method with black cotton, leaving the strips in the box for her grandchildren to use, which they always did with ferocious speed and efficiency.

She sighed as she worked. It was not much fun decorating the tree by herself. No one would see it until the day after Boxing Day when the daily would be back. If only her tenants had not gone away she could have invited them in for some small celebration. But the basement man was in his own home in Essex, and the first floor couple always went to an hotel for Christmas, allowing her to use their flat for Dorothy and Hugh and the children. And this year the top floor, three girl students, had joined a college group to go skiing. So the house was quite empty. There was no one left to invite, except perhaps her next door neighbors. But that would be impossible. They had detestable children, rude, destructive, uncontrolled brats. She had already complained about broken glass and dirty sweet papers thrown into her forecourt. She could not possibly ask them to enjoy her Christmas tree with her. They might damage it. Perhaps she ought to have agreed to go to May, or let her come to her. She was one of the last of her friends, but never an intimate one. And such a chatterer. Nonstop, as Hugh would say.

By the time Mrs. Fairlands had fastened the last golden ball and draped the last glittering piece of tinsel and tied the crowning piece, the six-pronged shining silver star, to the topmost twig and fixed the candles upright in their socket clips, dusk had fallen. She had been obliged to turn on all her lights some time before she had done. Now she moved again to her windows, drew the curtains, turned off all the wall lights, and with one reading lamp beside her chair sat down near the glowing fire.

It was nearly an hour after her usual teatime, she noticed. But she was tired. Pleasantly tired, satisfied with her work, shining quietly in its dark corner, bringing back so many memories of her childhood in this house, of her brief marriage, cut off by the battle of the Marne, of Dorothy, her only child, brought up here, too, since there was nowhere for them to live except with the parents she had so recently left. Mrs. Fairlands decided to skip tea and have an early supper with a boiled egg and cake.

She dozed, snoring gently, her ancient, wrinkled hand twitching from time to time as her head lolled on and off the cushion behind it.

She woke with a start, confused, trembling. There was a ringing

in her head that resolved, as full consciousness returned to her, into a ringing of bells, not only her own, just inside her front door, but those of the other two flats, shrilling and buzzing in the background.

Still trembling, her mouth dry with fright and openmouthed sleep, she sat up, trying to think. What time was it? The clock on the mantelpiece told her it was nearly seven. Could she really have slept for two whole hours? There was silence now. Could it really have been the bell, all the bells, that had woken her? If so, it was a very good thing. She had no business to be asleep in the afternoon, in a chair of all places.

Mrs. Fairlands got to her feet, shakily. Whoever it was at the door must have given up and gone away. Standing still, she began to tremble again. For she remembered things Dorothy and Hugh and her very few remaining friends said to her from time to time. "Aren't you afraid of burglars?" "I wouldn't have the nerve to live alone!" "They ring you up, and if there is no answer, they know you're out, so they come and break in."

Well, there had been no answer to this bell ringing, so whoever it was, if ill-intentioned, might even now be forcing the door or prowling round the house, looking for an open window.

While she stood there in the middle of her drawing room, trying to build up enough courage to go round her flat pulling the rest of the curtains, fastening the other windows, Mrs. Fairlands heard sounds that instantly explained the situation. She heard, raggedly begun, out of tune, but reassuringly familiar, the strains of "Once in Royal David's City."

Carol singers! Of course. Why had she not thought of them instead of frightening herself to death with gruesome suspicions?

Mrs. Fairlands, always remembering her age, her gamble, went to the side window of the bay and, pulling back the edge of the curtain, looked out. A darkclad group stood there, six young people, four girls with scarves on their heads, two boys with woolly caps. They had a single electric torch directed onto a sheet of paper held by the central figure of the group.

Mrs. Fairlands watched them for a few seconds. Of course they had seen the light in her room, so they knew someone was in. How stupid of her to think of burglars. The light would have driven a burglar away if he was out looking for an empty house to break into. All her fears about the unanswered bell were a nonsense.

In her immense relief, and seeing the group straighten up as

they finished the hymn, she tapped at the glass. They turned quickly, shining the torch in her face. Though she was a little startled by this, she smiled and nodded, trying to convey the fact that she enjoyed their performance.

"Want another, missis?" one boy shouted.

She nodded again, let the curtain slip into place, and made her way to her bureau, where she kept her handbag. Her purse in the handbag held very little silver, but she found the half crown she was looking for and took it in her hand. "The Holly and the Ivy" was in full swing outside. Mrs. Fairlands decided that these children must have been well taught in school. It was not usual for small parties to sing real carols. Two lines of "Come, All Ye Faithful," followed by loud knocking, was much more likely.

As she moved to the door with the half crown in one hand, Mrs. Fairlands put the other to her throat to pull together the folds of her cardigan before leaving her warm room for the cold passage and the outer hall door. She felt her brooch, and instantly misgiving struck her. It was a diamond brooch, a very valuable article, left to her by her mother. It would perhaps be a mistake to appear at the door offering half a crown and flaunting several hundred pounds. They might have seen it already, in the light of the torch they had shone on her.

Mrs. Fairlands slipped the half crown into her cardigan pocket, unfastened the brooch, and, moving quickly to the little Christmas tree on its table, reached up to the top and pinned the brooch to the very center of the silver tinsel star. Then, chuckling at her own cleverness, her quick wit, she went out to the front door just as the bell rang again in her flat. She opened it on a group of fresh young faces and sturdy young bodies standing on her steps.

"I'm sorry I was so slow," she said. "You must forgive me, but I am not very young."

"I'll say," remarked the younger boy, staring. He thought he had never seen anything as old as this old geyser.

"You shut up," said the girl next to him, and the tallest one said, "Don't be rude."

"You sing very nicely," said Mrs. Fairlands. "Very well indeed. Did you learn at school?"

"Mostly at the club," said the older boy, whose voice went up and down, on the verge of breaking, Mrs. Fairlands thought, remembering her brothers.

She held out the half crown. The tallest of the four girls, the one

who had the piece of paper with the words of the carols on it, took the coin and smiled.

"I hope I haven't kept you too long," Mrs. Fairlands said. "You can't stay long at each house, can you, or you would never get any money worth having."

"They mostly don't give anything," one of the other girls said.

"Tell us get the 'ell out," said the irrepressible younger boy.

"We don't do it mostly for the money," said the tallest girl. "Not for ourselves, I mean."

"Give it to the club. Oxfam collection and that," said the tall boy.

"Don't you want it for yourselves?" Mrs. Fairlands was astonished. "Do you have enough pocket money without?"

They nodded gravely.

"I got a paper round," said the older boy.

"I do babysitting now and then," the tallest girl added.

"Well, thank you for coming," Mrs. Fairlands said. She was beginning to feel cold, standing there at the open door. "I must go back into my warm room. And you must keep moving, too, or you might catch colds."

"Thank you," they said in chorus. "Thanks a lot. Bye!"

She shut and locked the door as they turned, clattered down the steps, slammed the gate of the forecourt behind them. She went back to her drawing room. She watched from the window as they piled up the steps of the next house. And again she heard, more faintly because farther away, "Once in Royal David's City." There were tears in her old eyes as she left the window and stood for a few minutes staring down at the dull coals of her diminishing fire.

But very soon she rallied, took up the poker, mended her fire, went to her kitchen, and put on the kettle. Coming back to wait for it to boil, she looked again at her Christmas tree. The diamond brooch certainly gave an added distinction to the star, she thought. Amused once more by her originality, she went into her bedroom and from her jewel box on the dressing table took her two other valuable pieces, a pearl necklace and a diamond bracelet. The latter she had not worn for years. She wound each with a tinsel string and hung them among the branches of the tree.

She had just finished preparing her combined tea and supper when the front doorbell rang again. Leaving the tray in the kitchen, she went to her own front door and opened it. Once again a carol floated to her, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" this time.

There seemed to be only one voice singing. A lone child, she wondered, making the rounds by himself.

She hurried to the window of her drawing room, drew back the curtain, peeped out. No, not alone, but singing a solo. The pure, high boy's voice was louder here. The child, muffled up to the ears, had his head turned away from her towards three companions, whose small figures and pale faces were intent upon the door. They did not seem to notice her at the window as the other group had done, for they did not turn in her direction. They were smaller, evidently younger, very serious. Mrs. Fairlands, touched, willing again to defeat her loneliness in a few minutes' talk, took another half crown from her purse and went out to the main hall and the big door.

"Thank you, children," she said as she opened it. "That was very—"

Her intended praise died in her throat. She gasped, tried to back away. The children now wore black stockings over their faces. Their eyes glittered through slits; there were holes for their noses and mouths.

"That's a very silly joke," said Mrs. Fairlands in a high voice. "I shall not give you the money I brought for you. Go home. Go away."

She backed inside the door, catching at the knob to close it. But the small figures advanced upon her. One of them held the door while two others pushed her away from it. She saw the fourth, the singer, hesitate, then turn and run out into the street.

"Stop this!" Mrs. Fairlands said again in a voice that had once been commanding but now broke as she repeated the order. Silently, remorselessly, the three figures forced her back; they shut and locked the main door, they pushed her, stumbling now, terrified, bewildered, through her own front door and into her drawing room.

It was an outrage, an appalling, unheard-of challenge. Mrs. Fairlands had always met a challenge with vigor. She did so now. She tore herself from the grasp of one pair of small hands to box the ears of another short figure. She swept round at the third, pulling the stocking halfway up his face, pushing him violently against the wall so his face met it with a satisfactory smack.

"Stop it!" she panted. "Stop it or I'll call the police!"

At that they all leaped at her, pushing, punching, dragging her to an upright chair. She struggled for a few seconds, but her breath



was going. When they had her sitting down, she was incapable of movement. They tied her hands and ankles to the chair and stood back. They began to talk, all at once to start with, but at a gesture from one, the other two became silent.

When Mrs. Fairlands heard the voices, she became rigid with shock and horror. Such words, such phrases, such tones, such evil loose in the world, in her house, in her quiet room. Her face grew cold, she thought she would faint. And still the persistent demand went on.

"We want the money. Where d'you keep it? Come on. Give. Where d'you keep it?"

"At my bank," she gasped.

"That's no answer. Where?"

She directed them to the bureau, where they found and rifled her handbag, taking the three pound notes and five shillings' worth of small change that was all the currency she had in the flat.

Clearly they were astonished at the small amount. They threatened, standing round her, muttering threats and curses.

"I'm *not* rich," she kept repeating. "I live chiefly on the rents of the flats and a very small private income. It's all paid into my bank. I cash a check each week, a small check to cover my food and the wages of my daily help."

"Jewelry," one of them said. "You got jewelry. Rich old cows dolled up—we seen 'em. That's why we come. You got it. Give."

She rallied a little, told them where to find her poor trinkets. Across the room her diamond brooch winked discreetly in the fire-light. They were too stupid, too savage, too—horrible to think of searching the room carefully. Let them take the beads, the dress jewelry, the amber pendant. She leaned her aching head against the hard back of the chair and closed her eyes.

After what seemed a long time they came back. Their tempers were not improved. They grumbled among themselves—almost quarreling—in loud harsh tones.

"Radio's worth nil. Prehistoric. No transistor. No record player. Might lift that old clock."

"Money stashed away. Mean old bitch."

"Best get going."

Mrs. Fairlands, eyes still closed, heard a faint sound outside the window. Her doorbell rang once. More carol singers? If they knew, they could save her. If they knew—

She began to scream. She meant to scream loudly, but the noise

that came from her was a feeble croak. In her own head it was a scream. To her tormentors it was derisory, but still a challenge. They refused to be challenged.

They gagged her with a strip of sticking plaster, they pulled out the flex of her telephone. They bundled the few valuables they had collected into the large pockets of their overcoats and left the flat, pulling shut the two front doors as they went. Mrs. Fairlands was alone again, but gagged and bound and quite unable to free herself.

At first she felt a profound relief in the silence, the emptiness of the room. The horror had gone, and though she was uncomfortable, she was not yet in pain. They had left the light on—all the lights, she decided. She could see through the open door of the room the lighted passage and, beyond, a streak of light from her bedroom. Had they been in the kitchen? Taken her Christmas dinner, perhaps, the chicken her daily had cooked for her? She remembered her supper and realized fully, for the first time, that she could not open her mouth and that she could not free her hands.

Even now she refused to give way to panic. She decided to rest until her strength came back and she could, by exercising it, loosen her bonds. But her strength did not come back. It ebbed as the night advanced and the fire died and the room grew cold and colder. For the first time she regretted not accepting May's suggestion that she should spend Christmas with her, occupying the flat above in place of Dorothy. Between them they could have defeated those little monsters. Or she could herself have gone to Leatherhead. She was insured for burglary.

She regretted those things that might have saved her, but she did not regret the gamble of refusing them. She recognized now that the gamble was lost. It had to be lost in the end, but she would have chosen a more dignified finish than this would be.

She cried a little in her weakness and the pain she now suffered in her wrists and ankles and back. But the tears ran down her nose and blocked it, which stopped her breathing and made her choke. She stopped crying, resigned herself, prayed a little, considered one or two sins she had never forgotten but on whose account she had never felt remorse until now. Later on she lapsed into semiconsciousness, a half-dream world of past scenes and present cares, of her mother, resplendent in low-cut green chiffon and diamonds, the diamond brooch and bracelet now decorating the tree across the room. Of Bobbie, in a fever, plagued by itching spots, of Dorothy as a little girl, blotched with measles.

Towards morning, unable any longer to breathe properly, exhausted by pain, hunger, and cold, Mrs. Fairlands died.

The milkman came along the road early on Christmas morning, anxious to finish his round and get back to his family. At Mrs. Fairlands' door he stopped. There were no milk bottles standing outside and no notice. He had seen her in person the day before when she had explained that her daughter and family were not coming this year so she would only need her usual pint that day.

"But I'll put out the bottles and the ticket for tomorrow as usual," she had said.

"You wouldn't like to order now, madam?" he had asked, thinking it would save her trouble.

"No, thank you," she had answered. "I prefer to decide in the evening, when I see what milk I have left."

But there were no bottles and no ticket and she was a very, very old lady and had had this disappointment over her family not coming.

The milkman looked at the door and then at the windows. It was still dark, and the light shone clearly behind the closed curtains. He had seen it when he went in through the gate but had thought nothing of it, being intent on his job. Besides, there were lights in a good many houses and the squeals of delighted children finding Christmas stockings bulging on the posts of their beds. But here, he reminded himself, there were no children.

He tapped on the window and listened. There was no movement in the house. Perhaps she'd forgotten, being practically senile. He left a pint bottle on the doorstep. But passing a constable on a scooter at the end of the road, he stopped to signal to him and told him about Mrs. Fairlands. "Know 'oo I mean?" he asked.

The constable nodded and thanked the milkman. No harm in making sure. He was pretty well browned off—nothing doing—empty streets—not a hooligan in sight—layabouts mostly drunk in the cells after last night's parties—villains all at the holiday resorts, casing jobs.

He left the scooter at the curb and tried to rouse Mrs. Fairlands. He did not succeed, so his anxiety grew. All the lights were on in the flat, front and back as far as he could make out. All her lights. The other flats were in total darkness. People away. She must have had a stroke or actually croaked, he thought. He rode on to the nearest telephone box.

The local police station sent a sergeant and another constable to join the man on the beat. Together they managed to open the kitchen window at the back, and when they saw the tray with a meal prepared but untouched, one of them climbed in. He found Mrs. Fairlands as the thieves had left her. There was no doubt at all what had happened.

"Ambulance," said the sergeant briefly. "Get the super first, though. We'll be wanting the whole works."

"The phone's gone," the constable said. "Pulled out."

"Bastard! Leave her like this when she couldn't phone anyway and wouldn't be up to leaving the house till he'd had plenty time to make six getaways. Bloody bastard!"

"Wonder how much he got?"

"Damn all, I should think. They don't keep their savings in the mattress up this way."

The constable on the scooter rode off to report, and before long, routine investigations were well under way. The doctor discovered no outward injuries and decided that death was probably due to shock, cold, and exhaustion, taking into account the victim's obviously advanced age. Detective-Inspector Brooks of the divisional CID found plenty of papers in the bureau to give him all the information he needed about Mrs. Fairlands' financial position, her recent activities, and her nearest relations. Leaving the sergeant in charge at the flat while the experts in the various branches were at work, he went back to the local station to get in touch with Mrs. Fairlands' daughter, Dorothy Evans.

In Devonshire the news was received with horror, indignation, and remorse. In trying to do the best for her mother by not exposing her to possible infection, Mrs. Evans felt she had brought about her death.

"You can't think of it like that," her husband Hugh protested, trying to stem the bitter tears. "If she'd come down, she might have had an accident on the way or got pneumonia or something. Quite apart from shingles."

"But she was all alone! That's what's so frightful!"

"And it wasn't your fault. She could have had what's-her-name—Miss Bolton, the old girl who lives at Leatherhead."

"I thought May Bolton was going to have *her*. But you couldn't make Mother do a thing she hadn't thought of herself."

"Again, that wasn't your fault, was it?"

It occurred to him that his wife had inherited to some extent this

characteristic of his mother-in-law, but this was no time to remind her of it.

"You'll go up at once, I suppose?" he said when she was a little calmer.

"How can I?" The tears began to fall again. "Christmas Day and Bobbie's temperature still up and his spots itching like mad. Could you cope with all that?"

"I'd try," he said. "You know I'd do anything."

"Of course you would, darling." She was genuinely grateful for the happiness of her married life and at this moment of self-reproach prepared to give him most of the credit for it. "Honestly, I don't think I could face it. There'd be identification, wouldn't there? And hearing detail—" She shuddered, covering her face.

"Okay. I'll go up," Hugh told her. He really preferred this arrangement. "I'll take the car in to Exeter and get the first through train there is. It's very early. Apparently her milkman made the discovery."

So Hugh Evans reached the flat in the early afternoon to find a constable on duty at the door and the house locked up. He was directed to the police station, where Inspector Brooks was waiting for him.

"My wife was too upset to come alone," he explained, "and we couldn't leave the family on their own. They've all got chicken pox; the youngest's quite bad with it today."

He went on to explain all the reasons why Mrs. Fairlands had been alone in the flat.

"Quite," said Brooks, who had a difficult mother-in-law himself and was inclined to be sympathetic. "Quite. Nothing to stop her going to an hotel here in London over the holiday, was there?"

"Nothing at all. She could easily afford it. She isn't—wasn't—what you call rich, but she'd reached the age when she really *couldn't* spend much."

This led to a full description of Mrs. Fairlands' circumstances, which finished with Hugh pulling out a list, hastily written by Dorothy before he left home, of all the valuables she could remember that were still in Mrs. Fairlands' possession.

"Jewelry," said the inspector thoughtfully. "Now where would she keep that?"

"Doesn't it say? In her bedroom, I believe."

"Oh, yes. A jewel box, containing—yes. Well, Mr. Evans, there was no jewel box in the flat when we searched it."

"Obviously the thief took it, then. About the only thing worth taking. She wouldn't have much cash there. She took it from the bank in weekly amounts. I know that."

There was very little more help he could give, so Inspector Brooks took him to the mortuary where Mrs. Fairlands now lay. And after the identification, which Hugh found pitiable but not otherwise distressing, they went together to the flat.

"In case you can help us to note any more objects of value you find are missing," Brooks explained.

The rooms were in the same state in which they had been found. Hugh found this more shocking, more disturbing, than the colorless, peaceful face of the very old woman who had never been close to him, who had never shown a warm affection for any of them, though with her unusual vitality she must in her youth have been capable of passion.

He went from room to room and back again. He stopped beside the bureau. "I was thinking, on the way up," he said diffidently. "Her solicitor—that sort of thing. Insurances. I ought—can I have a look through this lot?"

"Of course, sir," Inspector Brooks answered politely. "I've had a look myself. You see, we aren't quite clear about motive."

"Not— But wasn't it a burglar? A brutal, thieving thug?"

"There is no sign whatever of breaking and entering. It appears that Mrs. Fairlands let the murderer in herself."

"But that's impossible."

"Is it? An old lady, feeling lonely perhaps. The doorbell rings. She thinks a friend has called to visit her. She goes and opens it. It's always happening."

"Yes. Yes, of course. It could have happened that way. Or a tramp asking for money—Christmas—"

"Tramps don't usually leave it as late as Christmas Eve. Generally smash a window and get put inside a day or two earlier."

"What worries you, then?"

"Just in case she had someone after her. Poor relation. Anyone who had it in for her, if she knew something damaging about him. Faked the burglary."

"But he seems to have taken her jewel box, and according to my wife, it was worth taking."

"Quite. We shall want a full description of the pieces, sir."

"She'll make it out for you. Or it may have been insured separately."

"I'm afraid not. Go ahead, though, Mr. Evans. I'll send my sergeant in, and he'll bring you back to the station with any essential papers you need for Mrs. Fairlands' solicitor."

Hugh worked at the papers for half an hour and then decided he had all the information he wanted. No steps of any kind need, or indeed could, be taken until the day after tomorrow, he knew. The solicitor could not begin to wind up Mrs. Fairlands' affairs for some time. Even the date of the inquest had not been fixed and would probably have to be adjourned.

Before leaving the flat, Hugh looked round the rooms once more, taking the sergeant with him. They paused before the mantelpiece, untouched by the thieves, a poignant reminder of the life so abruptly ended. Hugh looked at the cards and then glanced at the Christmas tree.

"Poor old thing!" he said. "We never thought she'd go like this. We ought all to have been here today. She always decorated a tree for us—" He broke off, genuinely moved for the first time.

"So I understand," the sergeant said gruffly, sharing the wave of sentiment.

"My wife— I wonder— D'you think it'd be in order to get rid of it?"

"The tree, sir?"

"Yes. Put it out at the back somewhere. Less upsetting—Mrs. Evans will be coming up the day after tomorrow. By that time the dustmen may have called."

"I understand. I don't see any harm—"

"Right."

Hurrying, in case the sergeant should change his mind, Hugh took up the bowl, and turning his face away to spare it from being pricked by the pine needles, he carried it out to the back of the house where he stood it beside the row of three dustbins. At any rate, he thought, going back to join the sergeant, Dorothy would be spared the feelings that overcame him so unexpectedly.

He was not altogether right in this. Mrs. Evans traveled to London on the day after Boxing Day. The inquest opened on this day, with a jury. Evidence was given of the finding of the body. Medical evidence gave the cause of death as cold and exhaustion and bronchial edema from partial suffocation by a plaster gag. The verdict was murder by a person or persons unknown.

After the inquest, Mrs. Fairlands' solicitor, who had supported Mrs. Evans during the ordeal in court, went with her to the flat.



They arrived just as the municipal dust cart was beginning to move away. One of the older dustmen came up to them.

"You for the old lady they did Christmas Eve?" he asked, with some hesitation.

"I'm her daughter," Dorothy said, her eyes filling again, as they still did all too readily.

"What d'you want?" asked the solicitor, who was anxious to get back to his office.

"No offense," said the man, ignoring him and keeping his eyes on Dorothy's face. "It's like this 'ere, see. They put a Christmas tree outside, by the bins, see. Decorated. We didn't like to take it, seeing it's not exactly rubbish and her gone and that. Nobody about we could ask—"

Dorothy understood. The Christmas tree. Hugh's doing, obviously. Sweet of him.

"Of course you must have it, if it's any use to you now, so late. Have you got children?"

"Three, ma'am. Two younguns. I arsked the other chaps. They don't want it. They said to leave it."

"No, you take it," Dorothy told him. "I don't want to see it. I don't want to be reminded—"

"Thanks a lot, dear," the dustman said, gravely sympathetic, walking back round the house.

The solicitor took the door key from Dorothy and let her in, so she did not see the tree as the dustman emerged with it held carefully before him.

In his home that evening the tree was greeted with a mixture of joy and derision.

"As if I 'adn't enough to clear up yesterday and the day before," his wife complained, half angry, half laughing. "Where'd you get it, anyway?"

When he had finished telling her, the two children, who had listened, crept away to play with the new glittering toy. And before long Mavis, the youngest, found the brooch pinned to the star. She unfastened it carefully and held it in her hand, turning it this way and that to catch the light.

But not for long. Her brother Ernie, two years older, soon snatched it. Mavis went for him, and he ran, making for the front door to escape into the street where Mavis was forbidden to play. Though she seldom obeyed the rule, on this occasion she used it to

make loud protest, setting up a howl that brought her mother to the door of the kitchen.

But Ernie had not escaped with his prize. His elder brother Ron was on the point of entering, and when Ernie flung wide the door, Ron pushed in, shoving his little brother back.

"'E's nicked my star," Mavis wailed. "Make 'im give me back, Ron. It's mine. Off the tree."

Ron took Ernie by the back of his collar and swung him round.

"Give!" he said firmly. Ernie clenched his right fist, betraying himself. Ron took his arm, bent his hand over forwards, and, as the brooch fell to the floor, stooped to pick it up. Ernie was now in tears.

"Where'd 'e get it?" Ron asked over the child's doubled-up, weeping form.

"The tree," Mavis repeated. "I found it. On the star—on the tree."

"Wot the 'ell d'she mean?" Ron asked, exasperated.

"Shut up, the lot of you!" their mother cried fiercely from the kitchen where she had retreated. "Ron, come on in to your tea. Late as usual. Why you never—"

"Okay, Mum," the boy said, unrepentant. "I never—"

He sat down, looking at the sparkling object in his hand.

"What'd Mavis mean about a tree?"

"Christmas tree. Dad brought it in. I've a good mind to put it on the fire. Nothing but argument since 'e fetched it."

"It's pretty," Ron said, meaning the brooch in his hand. "Dress jewelry, they calls it." He slipped it into his pocket.

"That's mine," Mavis insisted. "I found it pinned on that star on the tree. You give it back, Ron."

"Leave 'im alone," their mother said, smacking away the reaching hands. "Go and play with your blasted tree. Dad didn't ought t'ave brought it. Ought t'ave 'ad more sense—"

Ron sat quietly, eating his kipper and drinking his tea. When he had finished, he stacked his crockery in the sink, went upstairs, changed his shirt, put a pair of shiny dancing shoes in the pockets of his mackintosh, and went off to the club where his current girlfriend, Sally, fifteen like himself, attending the same comprehensive school, was waiting for him.

"You're late," she said over her shoulder, not leaving the group of her girlfriends.

"I've 'eard that before tonight. Mum was creating. Not my fault if Mr. Pope wants to see me about exam papers."

"You're never taking G.C.E.?"

"Why not?"

"Coo! 'Oo started that lark?"

"Mr. Pope. I just told you. D'you want to dance or don't you?"

She did and she knew Ron was not one to wait indefinitely. So she joined him, and together they went to the main hall where dancing was in progress, with a band formed by club members.

"'Alf a mo!" Ron said as they reached the door. "I got something you'll like."

He produced the brooch.

Sally was delighted. This was no cheap store piece. It was slap-up dress jewelry, like the things you saw in the West End, in Bond Street, in the Burlington Arcade, even. She told him she'd wear it just below her left shoulder near the neck edge of her dress. When they moved on to the dance floor she was holding her head higher and swinging her hips more than ever before. She and Ron danced well together. That night many couples stood still to watch them.

About an hour later the dancing came to a sudden end with a sound of breaking glass and shouting that grew in volume and ferocity.

"Raid!" yelled the boys on the dance floor, deserting their partners and crowding to the door. "Those bloody Wingers again."

The sounds of battle led them, running swiftly, to the table-tennis and billiards room, where a shambles confronted them. Overturned tables, ripped cloth, broken glass were everywhere. Tall youths and younger lads were fighting indiscriminately. Above the din the club warden and the three voluntary workers, two of them women, raised their voices in appeal and admonishment, equally ignored. The young barrister who attended once a week to give legal advice free, as a form of social service, to those who asked for it plunged into the battle, only to be flung out again nursing a twisted arm. It was the club caretaker, old and experienced in gang warfare, who summoned the police. They arrived silently, snatched ringleaders with expert knowledge or recognition, hemmed in their captives while the battle melted, and waited while their colleagues, posted at the doors of the club, turned back all would-be escapers.

Before long complete order was restored. In the dance hall the line of prisoners stood below the platform where the band had played. They included club members as well as strangers. The rest, cowed, bunched together near the door, also included a few

strangers. Murmurings against these soon added them to the row of captives.

"Now," said the sergeant, who had arrived in answer to the call, "Mr. Smith will tell me who belongs here and who doesn't."

The goats were quickly separated from the rather black sheep.

"Next, who was playing table tennis when the raid commenced?"

Six hands shot up from the line. Some disheveled girls near the door also held up their hands.

"The rest were in here dancing," the warden said. "The boys left the girls when they heard the row, I think."

"That's right," Ron said boldly. "We 'eard glass going, and we guessed it was them buggers. They been 'ere before."

"They don't learn," said the sergeant with a baleful glance at the goats, who shuffled their feet and looked sulky.

"You'll be charged at the station," the sergeant went on, "and I'll want statements from some of your lads," he told the warden. "Also from you and your assistants. These other kids can all go home. Quietly, mind," he said, raising his voice. "Show us there's some of you can behave like reasonable adults and not childish savages."

Sally ran forward to Ron as he left the row under the platform. He took her hand as they walked towards the door. But the sergeant had seen something that surprised him. He made a signal over their heads. At the door they were stopped.

"I think you're wanted. Stand aside for a minute," the constable told them.

The sergeant was the one who had been at the flat in the first part of the Fairlands case. He had been there when a second detailed examination of the flat was made in case the missing jewelry had been hidden away and had therefore escaped the thief. He had formed a very clear picture in his mind of what he was looking for from Mrs. Evans' description. As Sally passed him on her way to the door with Ron, part of the picture presented itself to his astonished eyes.

He turned to the warden.

"That pair. Can I have a word with them somewhere private?"

"Who? Ron Sharp and Sally Biggs? Two of our very nicest—"

The two were within earshot. They exchanged a look of amusement instantly damped by the sergeant, who ordered them briefly to follow him. In the warden's office, with the door shut, he said to Sally, "Where did you get that brooch you're wearing?"

The girl flushed. Ron said angrily, "I give it 'er. So what?"

"So where did you come by it?"

Ron hesitated. He didn't want to let himself down in Sally's eyes. He wanted her to think he'd bought it specially for her. He said, aggressively, "That's my business."

"I don't think so." Turning to Sally, the sergeant said, "Would you mind letting me have a look at it, miss?"

The girl was becoming frightened. Surely Ron hadn't done anything silly? He was looking upset. Perhaps—

"All right," she said, undoing the brooch and handing it over. "Poor eyesight, I suppose."

It was feeble defiance, and the sergeant ignored it. He said, "I'll have to ask you two to come down to the station. I'm not an expert, but we shall have to know a great deal more about this article, and Inspector Brooks will be particularly interested to know where it came from."

Ron remaining obstinately silent in spite of Sally's entreaty, the two found themselves presently sitting opposite Inspector Brooks, with the brooch lying on a piece of white paper before them.

"This brooch," said the inspector sternly, "is one piece of jewelry listed as missing from the flat of a Mrs. Fairlands, who was robbed and murdered on Christmas Eve or early Christmas Day."

"Never!" whispered Sally, aghast.

Ron said nothing. He was not a stupid boy, and he realized at once that he must now speak, whatever Sally thought of him. Also that he had a good case if he didn't say too much. So, after careful thought, he told Brooks exactly how and when he had come by the brooch and advised him to check this with his father and mother. The old lady's son had stuck the tree out by the dustbins, his mother had said, and her daughter had told his father he could have it to take home.

Inspector Brooks found the tale too fantastic to be untrue. Taking the brooch and the two subdued youngsters with him, he went to Ron's home, where more surprises awaited him. After listening to Mr. Sharp's account of the Christmas tree, which exactly tallied with Ron's, he went into the next room where the younger children were playing and Mrs. Sharp was placidly watching television.

"Which of you two found the brooch?" Brooks asked. The little girl was persuaded to agree that she had done so.

"But I got these," the boy said. He dived into his pocket and dragged out the pearl necklace and the diamond bracelet.

"'Struth!" said the inspector, overcome. "She must've been balmy."

"No, she wasn't," Sally broke in. "She was nice. She give us two and a tanner."

"She *what*?"

Sally explained the carol singing expedition. They had been up four roads in that part, she said, and only two nicker the lot.

"Mostly it was nil," she said. "Then there was some give a bob and this old gentleman and the woman with 'im ten bob each. We packed it in after that."

"This means you actually went to Mrs. Fairlands' house?" Brooks said sternly to Ron.

"With the others—yes."

"Did you go inside?"

"No."

"No." Sally supported him. "She come out."

"Was she wearing the brooch?"

"No," said Ron.

"Not when she come out, she wasn't," Sally corrected him.

Ron kicked her ankle gently. The inspector noticed this.

"When did you see it?" he asked Sally.

"When she looked through the window at us. We shone the torch on 'er. It didn't 'alf shine."

"But you didn't recognize it when Ron gave it to you?"

"Why should I? I never saw it close. It was pinned on 'er dress at the neck. I didn't think of it till you said."

Brooks nodded. This seemed fair enough. He turned to face Ron.

"So you went back alone later to get it? Right?"

"I never! It's a damned lie!" the boy cried fiercely.

Mr. Sharp took a step forward. His wife bundled the younger children out of the room. Sally began to cry.

"'Oo are you accusing?" Mr. Sharp said heavily. "You 'eard 'ow I come by the tree. My mates was there. The things was on it. I got witnesses. If Ron did that job, would 'e leave the only things worth 'aving? It says in the paper nothing of value, don't it?"

Brooks realized the force of this argument, however badly put. He'd been carried away a little. Unusual for him; he was surprised at himself. But the murder had been a particularly revolting one, and until these jewels turned up, he'd had no idea where to look. Carol singers. It might be a line and then again it mightn't.

He took careful statements from Ron, Sally, Ron's father, and

the two younger children. He took the other pieces of jewelry and the Christmas tree. Carol singers. Mrs. Fairlands had opened the door to Ron's lot, having taken off her brooch if the story was true. Having hidden it very cleverly. He and his men had missed it completely. A Christmas tree decorated with flashy bits and pieces as usual. Standing back against a wall. They'd ignored it. Seen nothing but tinsel and glitter for weeks past. Of course they hadn't noticed it. The real thief or thieves hadn't noticed it, either.

Back at the station he locked away the jewels, labeled, in the safe and rang up Hugh Evans. He did not tell him where the pieces had been found.

Afterwards he had to deal with some of the hooligans who had now been charged with breaking, entering, willful damage, and making an affray. He wished he could pin Mrs. Fairlands' murder on their ringleader, a most degenerate and evil youth. Unfortunately, the whole gang had been in trouble in the West End that night; most of them had spent what remained of it in Bow Street police station. So they were out. But routine investigations now had a definite aim. To collect a list of all those who had sung carols at the house in Mrs. Fairlands' road on Christmas Eve, to question the singers about the times they had appeared there and about the houses they had visited.

It was not easy. Carol singers came from many social groups and often traveled far from their own homes. The youth clubs in the district were helpful; so were the various student bodies and hostels in the neighborhood. Brooks's manor was wide and very variously populated. In four days he had made no headway at all.

A radio message went out, appealing to carol singers to report at the police station if they were near Mrs. Fairlands' house at any time on Christmas Eve. The press took up the quest, dwelling on the pathetic aspects of the old woman's tragic death at a time of traditional peace on earth and good will towards men. All right-minded citizens must want to help the law over this revolting crime.

But the citizens maintained their attitude of apathy or caution.

Except for one, a freelance journalist, Tom Meadows, who had an easy manner with young people because he liked them. He became interested because the case seemed to involve young people. It was just up his street. So he went first to the Sharp family, gained their complete confidence, and had a long talk with Ron.

The boy was willing to help. After he had got over his indignation



with the law for daring to suspect him, he had had sense enough to see how this had been inevitable. His anger was directed more truly at the unknown thugs responsible. He remembered Mrs. Fairlands with respect and pity. He was ready to do anything Tom Meadows suggested.

The journalist was convinced that the criminal or criminals must be local, with local knowledge. It was unlikely they would wander from house to house, taking a chance on finding one that might be profitable. It was far more likely that they knew already that Mrs. Fairlands lived alone, would be quite alone over Christmas and therefore defenseless. But their information had been incomplete. They had not known how little money she kept at the flat. No one had known this except her family. Or had they?

Meadows, patient and amiable, worked his way from the Sharps to the postman, the milkman, and through the latter to the daily.

"Well, of course I mentioned 'er being alone for the 'oliday. I told that detective so. In the way of conversation, I told 'im. Why shouldn't I?"

"Why indeed. But who did you tell, exactly?"

"I disremember. Anyone, I suppose. If we was comparing. I'm on me own now meself, but I go up to me brother's at the 'olidays."

"Where would that be?"

"Notting 'Ill way. 'E's on the railway. Paddington."

Bit by bit Meadows extracted a list of her friends and relations, those with whom she had talked most often during the week before Christmas. Among her various nephews and nieces was a girl who went to the same comprehensive school as Ron and his girlfriend Sally.

Ron listened to the assignment Meadows gave him.

"Sally won't like it," he said candidly.

"Bring her into it, then. Pretend it's all your own idea."

Ron grinned.

"Shirl won't like that," he said.

Tom Meadows laughed.

"Fix it any way you like," he said. "But I think this girl Shirley was with a group and did go to sing carols for Mrs. Fairlands. I know she isn't on the official list, so she hasn't reported it. I want to know why."

"I'm not shopping anyone," Ron said warily.

"I'm not asking you to. I don't imagine Shirley or her friends did Mrs. Fairlands. But it's just possible she knows or saw something

and is afraid to speak up for fear of reprisals."

"Cor!" said Ron. It was like a page of his favorite magazine working out in real life. He confided in Sally, and they went to work.

The upshot was interesting. Shirley did have something to say, and she said it to Tom Meadows in her own home with her disapproving mother sitting beside her.

"I never did like the idea of Shirl going out after dark, begging at house doors. That's all it really is, isn't it? My children have very good pocket money. They've nothing to complain of."

"I'm sure they haven't," Meadows said mildly. "But there's a lot more to carol singing than asking for money. Isn't there, Shirley?"

"I'll say," the girl answered. "Mum don't understand."

"You can't stop her," the mother complained. "Self-willed, Stubborn. I don't know, I'm sure. Out after dark. My dad'd've taken his belt to me for less."

"There were four of us," Shirley protested. "It wasn't late. Not above seven or eight."

The time was right, Meadows noted, if she was speaking of her visit to Mrs. Fairlands' road. She was. Encouraged to describe everything, she agreed that her group was working towards the house especially to entertain the old lady who was going to be alone for Christmas. She'd got that from her aunt, who worked for Mrs. Fairlands. They began at the far end of the road on the same side as the old lady. When they were about six houses away, they saw another group go up to it or to one near it. Then they were singing themselves. The next time she looked round, she saw one child running away up the road. She did not know where he had come from. She did not see the others.

"You did not see them go on?"

"No. They weren't in the road then, but they might have gone right on while we were singing. There's a turning off, isn't there?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, we went up to Mrs. Fairlands' and rang the bell. I thought I'd tell her she knew my aunt and we'd come special."

"Yes. What happened?"

"Nothing. At least—"

"Go on. Don't be frightened."

Shirley's face had gone very pale.

"There were men's voices inside. Arguing like. Nasty. We scarpered."

Tom Meadows nodded gravely.

"That would be upsetting. *Men's* voices? Or big boys?"

"Could be either, couldn't it? Well, perhaps more like sixth form boys, at that."

"You thought it was boys, didn't you? Boys from your school."

Shirley was silent.

"You thought they'd know and have it in for you if you told. Didn't you? I won't let you down, Shirley. Didn't you?"

She whispered, "Yes," and added, "Some of our boys got knives. I seen them."

Meadows went to Inspector Brooks. He explained how Ron had helped him to get in touch with Shirley and the result of that interview. The inspector, who had worked as a routine matter on all Mrs. Fairlands' contacts with the outer world, was too interested to feel annoyed at the other's success.

"Men's voices?" Brooks said incredulously.

"Most probably older lads," Meadows answered. "She agreed that was what frightened her group. They might have looked out and recognized them as they ran away."

"There's been no attempt at intimidations?"

"They're not all *that* stupid."

"No."

Brooks considered.

"This mustn't break in the papers yet, you understand?"

"Perfectly. But I shall stay around."

Inspector Brooks nodded, and Tom went away. Brooks took his sergeant and drove to Mrs. Fairlands' house. They still had the key of the flat, and they still had the house under observation.

The new information was disturbing, Brooks felt. Men's voices, raised in anger. Against poor Mrs. Fairlands, of course. But there were no adult fingerprints in the flat except those of the old lady herself and of her daily. Gloves had been worn, then. A professional job. But no signs whatever of breaking and entering. Therefore, Mrs. Fairlands had let them in. Why? She had peeped out at Ron's lot, to check who they were, obviously. She had not done so for Shirley's. Because she was in the power of the "men" whose voices had driven this other group away in terror.

But there had been two distinct small footprints in the dust of the outer hall and a palmprint on the outer door had been small, childsize.

Perhaps the child that Shirley had seen running down the road.

had been a decoy. The whole group she had noticed at Mrs. Fairlands' door might have been employed for that purpose and the men or older boys were lurking at the corner of the house, to pounce when the door opened. Possible, but not very likely. Far too risky, even on a dark evening. Shirley could not have seen distinctly. The street lamps were at longish intervals in that road. But there were always a few passersby. Even on Christmas Eve no professional group of villains would take such a risk.

Standing in the cold drawing room, now covered with a grey film of dust, Inspector Brooks decided to make another careful search for clues. He had missed the jewels. Though he felt justified in making it, his mistake was a distinct blot on his copybook. It was up to him now to retrieve his reputation. He sent the sergeant to take another look at the bedroom, with particular attention to the dressing table. He himself began to go over the drawing room with the greatest possible care.

Shirley's evidence suggested there had been more than one thief. The girl had said "voices." That meant at least two, which probably accounted for the fact, apart from her age, that neither Mrs. Fairlands nor her clothes gave any indication of a struggle. She had been overpowered immediately, it seemed. She had not been strong enough or agile enough to tear, scratch, pull off any fragment from her attackers' clothes or persons. There had been no trace of any useful material under her fingernails or elsewhere.

Brooks began methodically with the chair to which Mrs. Fairlands had been bound and worked his way outwards from that center. After the furniture, the carpet and curtains. After that the walls.

Near the door, opposite the fireplace, he found on the wall—two feet, three inches up from the floor—a small, round, brownish, greasy smear. He had not seen it before. In artificial light, he checked, it was nearly invisible. On this morning, with the first sunshine of the New Year coming into the room, the little patch was entirely obvious, slightly shiny where the light from the window caught it.

Inspector Brooks took a wooden spatula from his case of aids and carefully scraped off the substance into a small plastic box, sniffing at it as he did so.

"May I, too?" asked Tom Meadows behind him.

The inspector wheeled round with an angry exclamation.

"How did you get in?" he asked.

"Told the copper in your car I wanted to speak to you."

"What about?"

"Well, about how you were getting on, really," Tom said disarmingly. "I see you are. Please let me have one sniff."

Inspector Brooks was annoyed, both by the intrusion and the fact that he had not heard it, being so concentrated on his work. So he closed his box, shut it into his black bag, and called to the sergeant in the next room.

Meadows got down on his knees, leaned towards the wall, and sniffed. It was faint, since most of it had been scraped off, but he knew the smell. His freelancing had not been confined to journalism.

He was getting to his feet as the sergeant joined Inspector Brooks. The sergeant raised his eyebrows at the interloper.

"You can't keep the press's noses out of anything," said Brooks morosely.

The other two grinned. It was very apt.

"I'm just off," Tom said. "Good luck with your specimen, inspector. I know where to go now. So will you."

"Come back!" called Brooks. The young man was a menace. He would have to be controlled.

But Meadows was away, striding down the road until he was out of sight of the police car, then running to the nearest tube station where he knew he would find the latest newspaper editions. He bought one, opened it at the entertainments column, and read down the list.

He was a certain six hours ahead of Brooks, he felt sure, possibly more. Probably he had until tomorrow morning. He skipped his lunch and set to work.

Inspector Brooks got the report from the lab that evening, and the answer to his problem came to him as completely as it had done to Tom Meadows in Mrs. Fairlands' drawing room. His first action was to ring up Olympia. This proving fruitless, he sighed. Too late now to contact the big stores; they would all be closed and the employees of every kind gone home.

But in the morning some very extensive telephone calls to managers told him where he must go. He organized his forces to cover all the exits of a big store not very far from Mrs. Fairlands' house. With his sergeant he entered modestly by way of the men's department.

They took a lift from there to the third floor, emerging among the

toys. It was the tenth day of Christmas, with the school holidays in full swing and eager children, flush with Christmas money, choosing long-coveted treasures. A Father Christmas, white-bearded, in the usual red, hooded gown, rather too short for him, was moving about trying to promote a visit to the first of that day's performances of "Snowdrop and the Seven Dwarfs." As his insistence seeped into the minds of the abstracted young, they turned their heads to look at the attractive cardboard entrance of the little "theater" at the far end of the department. A gentle flow towards it began and gathered momentum. Inspector Brooks and the sergeant joined the stream.

Inside the theater there were small chairs in rows for the children. The grownups stood at the back. A gramophone played the Disney film music.

The early scenes were brief, mere tableaux with a line thrown in here and there for Snowdrop. The queen spoke the famous doggerel to her mirror.

The curtain fell and rose again on Snowdrop, surrounded by the Seven Dwarfs. Two of them had beards, real beards. Dopey rose to his feet and began to sing.

"Okay," whispered Brooks to the sergeant. "The child who sang and ran away."

The sergeant nodded. Brooks whispered again. "I'm going round the back. Get the audience here out quietly if the balloon goes up before they finish."

He tiptoed quietly away. He intended to catch the dwarfs in their dressing room immediately after the show, arrest the lot, and sort them out at the police station.

But the guilty ones had seen him move. Or rather Dopey, more guilt-laden and fearful than the rest, had noticed the two men who seemed to have no children with them, had seen their heads close together, had seen one move silently away. As Brooks disappeared, the midget's nerve broke. His song ended in a scream; he fled from the stage.

In the uproar that followed, the dwarf's scream was echoed by the frightened children. The lights went up in the theater, the shop assistants and the sergeant went into action to subdue their panic and get them out.

Inspector Brooks found himself in a maze of lathe and plaster backstage arrangements. He found three bewildered small figures, with anxious, wizened faces, trying to restrain Dopey, who was

still in the grip of his hysteria. A few sharp questions proved that the three had no idea what was happening.

The queen and Snowdrop appeared, highly indignant. Brooks, now holding Dopey firmly by the collar, demanded the other three dwarfs. The two girls, subdued and totally bewildered, pointed to their dressing room. It was empty, but a tumbled heap of costumes on the floor showed what they had done. The sergeant appeared, breathless.

"Take this chap," Brooks said, thrusting the now fainting Dopey at him. "Take him down. I'm shopping him. Get onto the management to warn all departments for the others."

He was gone, darting into the crowded toy department, where children and parents stood amazed or hurried towards the lifts, where a dense crowd stood huddled, anxious to leave the frightening trouble spot.

Brooks bawled an order.

The crowd at the lift melted away from it, leaving three small figures in overcoats and felt hats, trying in vain to push once more under cover.

They bolted, bunched together, but they did not get far. Round the corner of a piled table of soft toys Father Christmas was waiting. He leaped forward, tripped up one, snatched another, hit the third as he passed and grabbed him, too, as he fell.

The tripped one struggled up and on as Brooks appeared.

"I'll hold these two," panted Tom Meadows through his white beard, which had fallen sideways.

The chase was brief. Brooks gained on the dwarf. The latter knew it was hopeless. He snatched up a mallet lying beside a display of camping equipment and, rushing to the side of the store, leaped on a counter, from there clambered up a tier of shelves, beat a hole in the window behind them, and dived through. Horrified people and police on the pavement below saw the small body turning over and over like a leaf as it fell.

"All yours," said Tom Meadows, handing his captives, too limp now to struggle, to Inspector Brooks and tearing off his Father Christmas costume. "See you later."

He was gone, to shut himself in a telephone booth on the ground floor of the store and hand his favorite editor the scoop. It had paid off, taking over from the old boy, an ex-actor like himself, who was quite willing for a fiver to write a note pleading illness and sending a substitute. "Your reporter, Tom Meadows, dressed as Father



Christmas, today captured and handed over to the police two of the three murderers of Mrs. Fairlands—”

Inspector Brooks, with three frantic midgets demanding legal aid, scrabbling at the doors of their cells, took a lengthy statement from the fourth, the one with the treble voice whose nerve had broken on the fatal night, as it had again that day. Greasepaint had betrayed the little fiends, Brooks told him, privately regretting that Meadows had been a jump ahead of him there. Greasepaint left on in the rush to get at their prey. One of the brutes must have fallen against the wall, pushed by the old woman herself perhaps. He hoped so. He hoped it was her own action that had brought these squalid killers to justice.

---

### **SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER “UNSOLVED”:**

---

Sir Jingo's yarn is read by performing the knight's move (in chess) so as to cover the whole board. The answer is: “‘I know how he died,’ said Sir Jingo Yarn. ‘He was asleep during the sermon last Sunday morning, and dreamt that his creditors were after him. The worst among them, a man he had real cause to fear, was about to club his brains out when the parson thumped the pulpit. The effect was as if he had really been clubbed; he died instantly.’” The inspector did not believe this yarn because, of course, if the knight's uncle had died in his sleep in that way, how could Sir Jingo possibly have come to knowledge of his dream?

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

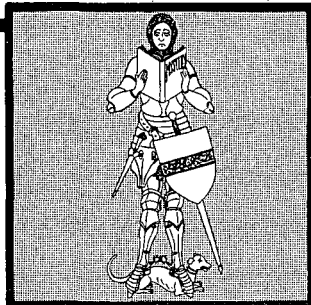


Illustration by Sheila Smith

**A**uthor Sarah Shankman's first two mysteries featuring Atlanta crime reporter Samantha ("Sam") Adams were penned under the name of Alice Storey. Look for the next two books in this strong series under her real name—and *do* look for them. This is fresh, sassy, and so-o-o very southern stuff, chock-full of homegrown characters, mouth-watering cuisine, regional customs (including voodoo), and curious expressions. In the latest, **She Walks in Beauty** (Pocket, \$21.00), the reader is further treated to a backstage peek at the Miss America pageant in Jersey City, where Sam suspects that some pretty ugly secrets may be masked behind the beautiful visages.

Simon Brett's redoubtable sleuthing widow, Mrs. Melita Pargeter, is back again in **Mrs. Pargeter's Package** (Scribners, \$18.95). Her third adventure takes her to the lovely island of Corfu, where she is accompanying a recently widowed friend on a group tour. Sudden death, however, not only shatters the peace of the island, it also disturbs Mrs. P's peace of mind. There's only one way to restore both, and that is to begin a little investigation of her own—with the help of her late husband's former cronies, of course. This series continues to surprise and delight.

Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone books are all in print now, and readers who appreciate strong novels featuring a female P.I. are celebrating. The newest is **Where Echoes Live** (Mysterious Press, \$17.95), chronicling a case that takes McCone from San Francisco to a ghost town, from a millionaire's mansion to a prospector's grubby shack, from a body in a still lake to a harrowing race against time in the Nevada desert. As always, Muller gives her reader sympathetic characters, a multilayered plot, and a well-

researched milieu as backdrop for the mystery.

Ellen Hart's sequel to *Hallowed Murder* is a mystery lover's feast, serving up satisfying characters in a story rich in snow-covered country house atmosphere, concocted with surprises and studded with secrets. Spending Christmas with her chum Cordelia at a friend's charming old country inn promises to be the perfect vacation for Minneapolis restaurateur Jane Lawless. But the lovely hotel setting for **Vital Lies** (Seal Press, \$9.95) threatens to become celebrated for more than its cuisine: it's recently become the target of several pranks, and Jane senses that the malice in the jokes may be rooted in a very disturbed psyche. *Vital Lies* is as cosy as a plum pudding, and quite as filling.

Carolyn G. Hart's fans are becoming legion, and her latest—**The Christie Caper** (Bantam, \$18.00)—should swell the numbers more. The tireless Annie Laurence Darling, owner of a mystery bookshop on a South Carolina island, is hosting a centennial celebration of Dame Agatha Christie. Mystery authors, readers, and scholars have gathered to attend panels, book-signings, and film showings of the great woman's work. They've come to buy and sell books, to compete for treasure hunt prizes, to rub shoulders with their favorite living practitioners of fictional crime. Unfortunately, one of them has also come to kill. Here we get Hart's answer to an age-old question: do avid mystery fans have an edge when the crime to be solved is a real one? For the answer to this—and much more—read the book.

The plot twists as unpredictably as a hangman's rope in **Swing** (Pocket Books, \$3.95), author L. L. Enger's sequel to the Edgar-nominated *Comeback*. That novel introduced former baseball star Gun Pedersen, who's now trying to uncover the connection between a long-ago suicide, an old ball pro's Hall of Fame hopes, and the brutal murder of a tenacious young reporter. His investigation moves him from Florida's spring training camps to Minnesota's frozen lakes, from baseball-card collectors to backwoods bullies, from clubhouse camaraderie to a deeply satisfying shocker of a conclusion. Enger (a pseudonym for two brothers) has created an amateur P.I. in a series to watch. *Swing* has muscle. *Swing* has heart, too. I'm a happy reader.

Faye Kellerman's series features a unique sleuthing team: a young Orthodox Jewish widow and mother of two boys and the Los Angeles homicide detective who falls in love with her. In **Day of Atonement** (Morrow, \$20.00), Rina and Decker are spending the High Holy Days in Brooklyn with Rina's late husband's par-

## WRAP UP YOUR HOLIDAY GIFT GIVING



This holiday season give a subscription to **Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine**. It's the perfect gift and it will be appreciated throughout the year.

Once-a-year holiday rates are now in effect. Your first gift subscription costs only \$20.95 for 15 issues. Each additional gift subscription is even less--just \$16.95 for 15 issues.

**Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine** is also available at these low holiday rates. The first subscription costs only \$20.95 for 15 issues, each additional subscription costs only \$16.95 for 15 issues.

Giving a gift subscription is easy. Just fill out the form below or if you prefer, call **TOLL FREE 1-800-333-3311**.

Mail To: Alfred Hitchcock  
P.O. Box 7055  
Red Oak, IA 51591

- ☐ Payment enclosed.  
☐ Bill me.  
☐ Please, renew my own subscription.

Gift to: \_\_\_\_\_ Bill to: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

☐ Alfred Hitchcock

☐ Ellery Queen

Gift recipients will begin their subscription in January, with the current issue.

YAWH-7

We publish two double issues, in June and Mid-December.  
Each double issue counts as two towards your subscription.  
Foreign orders please add \$6.00, (cash with order US funds).

ents—"not the honeymoon Decker had imagined." This fourth novel centers around a young teenage boy, his misplaced trust in a budding sociopath, and his family's pleas for help from the new "expert" in the family. As always, Kellerman's is a taut tale, suspensefully blending love and fear, skillfully exploring both the joys and anguish of faith and family, characterizing the bond that can be formed between two adults who come from different backgrounds but choose to share their lives. The resulting novels are complex, sophisticated, and thoroughly engrossing.

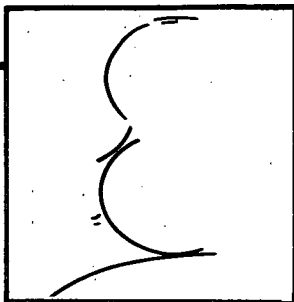
Paul Levine's *To Speak for the Dead* introduced Miami attorney Jake Lassiter, who comes back in *Night Vision* (Bantam, \$18.95). Before it peaks to its rather grisly conclusion, this story of a serial killer has introduced us to a dirty politico, a British beauty whose specialty is serial murders, and a computerized sex service. Jake and his sidekick, a retired medical examiner named Charlie, are still an ingratiating pair. The dialogue is snappy, the Florida scene feels authentic, and the action is no-holds-barred, all of which makes a good bet for readers who like their mysteries fast, furious, and darkly funny.

**The Last Detective** is Peter Lovesey's latest novel, and it's sure to please readers who enjoy a solid British whodunit. That's not to say that this is a conventional mystery by the author best-known for his Sergeant Cribb series; it's not. The protagonist is Detective Peter Diamond, whose entire career is coming to a close due to his sheer stubbornness. Further, the novel is written from more than one point of view, which turns out to be a very clever way of teasing readers who like to play "Beat the Detective" (Doubleday, \$18.50).

Retired FBI man Gregor Demarkian debuted in *Not a Creature Was Stirring*, which deservedly won an Edgar nomination for Best Paperback Original. In *Act of Darkness* (Bantam, \$3.99), Stephen Fox is the Democratic Party's presidential hopeful, with a bill to aid disabled children guaranteed to further his career. It can't hurt his two old college chums, either; one is Fox's campaign manager (the real brains behind Fox), while the other is the director of a private clinic that would benefit. But the announcement of the bill seems to have triggered off more than fireworks, and it's following two attempts on the senator's life that Demarkian is talked into joining a Fourth of July weekend at the mansion of Fox's movie queen mother-in-law. If you haven't yet discovered Demarkian and his interesting circle of friends, you might want to start at the beginning of the series and work your way up through the Easter mystery to this one, and on to the Halloween tale.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**W**ith Deceived getting the thriller treatment in its ads, the portrayal by Goldie Hawn of a blissfully happy wife, mother, and respected professional leads to the question: what's wrong with this picture?

After a murder, an antiques forgery scandal, an auto accident, and the obligatory chase, we find out.

The doe-eyed Hawn, in a rare dramatic role, plays Adrienne, a chic Manhattanite who runs a successful art restoration business with a friend. Adrienne meets Jack Saunders, her future husband, as a result of being stood up on a blind date.

Jack, played by the taut-faced John Heard, is a curator of antiquities for a prestigious museum. And he is simply charming. After a dinner of Chinese takeout, the two talk all night. They do gooey first-

date things like sing "Earth Angel" when Adrienne admits it's her favorite song. He does all the right things. But he's a little too charming, too perfect.

A quick cut, and Jack and Adrienne are celebrating their adorable daughter's fifth birthday. This is a together couple. They go to dress-up parties, hobnob with the right crowd, and live in a luxurious but comfy apartment, the kind most New Yorkers would probably kill for. For one thing, it has an incredible walk-in closet in the master bedroom.

Director Damian Harris makes use of the closet—Adrienne is caught there rifling through her husband's belongings, looking for clues to an affair he may be having. A valuable antique Egyptian necklace, a pivotal plot device, is hidden in and then taken from the closet. And Jack,

whose very identity comes into question, can be said to have more than a few skeletons there.

This is where the mystery begins. After Jack is killed in a car crash, a call from the Social Security office opens a Pandora's box of questions concerning just who Adrienne's husband really was.

At the same time, the question of forgery is swirling about the museum where Jack worked. And the Egyptian necklace is one piece under suspicion.

To answer the question posed earlier—what's wrong with this picture?—start with length. At one hundred and two minutes, the film drags. The first half, which establishes the Saunderses' happy life, is too long and drawn out. It's tedious. Although you know something dangerous is lurking right around the corner, the corner takes forever to get to.

Although she's supposed to be a grieving widow, in no time Mrs. Saunders turns into a one-woman detective agency. With nary a word to friends, family, or professional law enforce-

ment personnel, Adrienne takes off on an investigation that leads her to the seedy Brooklyn waterfront, the dusty archives of the Board of Education, and the realization that the man she was married to was actually someone else.

Although the case of Jack Saunders and his hidden identity is an intriguing one, it unfolds pretty matter-of-factly once it begins to unfold. There are no real curves in the road. You can see what's coming next.

*Deceived* is not totally without merit, and that's why it's particularly disappointing. Director Harris knows how to use the camera for maximum tension. A brief lingering shot here and there adds to a forboding feeling. An odd angle or two gives it that suspenseful oomph. But the cast, headed by Hawn and Heard, is serviceable but not that memorable. (An exception is Kate Reid as Jack's bitter, alcoholic Brooklyn mom.)

*Deceived* could have been a real Hitchcockian spellbinder. Instead it winds up a tepid thriller-by-numbers.



# THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious by Monte J. Anderson of Mesa, go to Joy Hewitt Mann of da; James F. Scheibner of



Photograph contest was won Arizona. Honorable mentions Spencerville, Ontario, Canada; Quincy, Massachusetts; Randall J. Covill of Atkinson, New Hampshire; D. J. Bart of Albuquerque, New Mexico; C. D. Longoria of Arlington, Texas; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Madeleine Dugas of Montreal, Quebec, Canada; Joe M. Crider of Fairbanks, Alaska; and Victor P. Dufault of Noank, Connecticut.

## DESPERATE MEASURES by Monte J. Anderson

The chief of police is reading the local sports page and comments aloud: "It's hard to believe the last high school football game is tomorrow."

"That's true," replied a deputy. "Seems like last week the fire department pulled the Carson City cannon out of the city swimming pool. Wonder why our kids steal the cannon just to send a message to the Tigers? They do it each year."

"That's because the city councils of the two cities agreed that taking the cannon would not be considered a crime," replied the chief.

"Well, year before last they hung the cannon from a tree. By their actions, the kids informed the Tigers they had less chance of beating the Ravens than a man scheduled to be hanged. And last year, the pool incident. They told them they would be swamped with scores."

"Thank goodness they won't take the cannon this year," the chief responded.

"I'm afraid they already have, chief."

"Why, the Ravens can't beat the Tigers. You say they took the cannon? Where did they put it?"

"By the bus stop."

"What message could that mean?"

"Think about it, chief. They know they can't win this year. They took the only action they could."

"Why, they didn't. That really would be a crime."

"Afraid they did, chief. The coach called and said he would appreciate our help in returning the team bus in time to play the game."

"Well, I'll be. They stole the Tigers' school bus!"

# CLASSIFIED

# MARKET

AM JANUARY/92

ALFRED HITCHCOCK—published 13 times a year. CLASSIFIED AD rate is \$2.90 per word—payable in advance—(\$43.50 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional.

## A GREAT INCOME OPPORTUNITY

FREE Home Business to do without investment, or experience. Mc's, POB 20710, Chicago, IL 60620.

## ADDITIONAL INCOME

GET PAID FOR READING BOOKS! \$100 per book. Send name, address to: Calco Publishing (Dept. C-148), 500 South Broad, Meriden, CT 06450.

GET paid up to \$500/week. Legitimate companies need HOMEWORKERS. Send SASE to: Rhos Edwards, 11430 Folkstone Dr., Forest Park, OH 45240.

## ANTIQUES, ARTS & CURIOS

CIVIL WAR Bullets with certificates of Authenticity, send \$8.00, MC, VISA Accepted, to: Treasure Shop, P.O. Box 644, Garner, NC 27529.

## AUTHORS' SERVICES

## HOW TO PUBLISH YOUR BOOK

Join our successful authors in a complete and reliable publishing program: publicity, advertising, handsome books. Speedy, efficient service. Send for FREE manuscript report & copy of Publish Your Book.

CARLTON PRESS Dept. SMA  
11 West 32 St., New York, 10001

LOOKING for a publisher? Learn how you can have your book published, promoted, distributed. Send for free booklet, HP-5, Van-tage Press, 516 W. 34th St., New York, NY 10001.

## BOOKS & PERIODICALS

ANNOTATED lists of new mysteries. Also used mystery catalog. Rue Morgue, 946 Pearl, Boulder, Colorado 80302. Order any in-print mystery: 1-800-356-5586.

## BOOKS & PERIODICALS—Cont'd

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265-0133.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free Catalogue! New and Recycled Detective Fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232.

FREE Catalogue of used & collectable detective fiction. Dunn & Powell Books, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, Maine 04609.

USED and collectible mysteries! Free list. Absolutely Books, 3202 E. Greenway #1273, Phoenix, AZ 85032.

FREE LIST! Used hardcover and paperback Mysteries. Search service. Page One, Box 442, Bridge Station, Niagara Falls, NY 14305.

100's of time-tested moneymaking opportunities. Catalogue \$1.00. Eagle Publications, Box 4186, Topeka, Kansas 66604-0186.

SAVE \$\$\$\$ ON BOOKS. New books 15%-25% off all categories. Books Direct. 800-487-2373 (fax 305-786-8560).

## BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing Mail! Free Supplies, Postage! Bonuses! Start Immediately! Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-MDC, Burnt Hills, NY 12027-0015.

STAY HOME! MAKE MONEY ADDRESSING ENVELOPES. VALUABLE GENUINE OFFER. 20¢. Write Lindco, 3636-DA Peterson Ave., Chicago, IL 60659.

MAKE Money using video camera. Details \$1.00 (refundable). Fuller, Box 154, Cottleville, MO 63338.

## BUY IT WHOLESALE

400,000 BARGAINS Below Wholesale! Many Free! Liquidations . . . Closeouts . . . Job Lots . . . Single Samples. Free Details. Worldwide Bargainhunters, Box 1409-IO, Holland MI 49424.

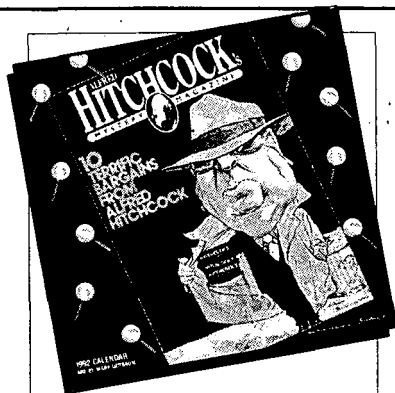
# PLACE

# CLASSIFIED

AH JANUARY/92

To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Director, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

## CALENDARS



### Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1992 Calendar

Order this 1992 calendar by sending a check or money order (no cash) to:

**Davis Publications**  
Calendars Dept. M  
380 Lexington Ave.  
NY, NY 10168-0035

In the US, please include price of calendar, **\$9.95** (NYC residents please add 8 1/4% sales tax) plus **\$2.75** for shipping and handling for the first calendar, each additional calendar add **\$5.00**.

In Canada, remit US dollars, include the price of the calendar plus **\$4.00** for shipping and handling for the first calendar, each additional calendar **\$1.75**.

## EDUCATION & INSTRUCTION

**WITCHCRAFT** Occult Miracle Power Secrets Gavin and Yvonne Frost. Now accepting students. 1502-AN, Newbern, NC 28563.

## FINANCIAL

DEBTS Pressing? We'll help now. Bad credit no problem. Licensed/Bonded. Applications to \$50,000. Not a loan company. Free application call 1-800-788-1141 or write: Allied Acceptance, Dept. IO, 3003 West Northern #1, Phoenix, Arizona 85051.

**BORROW \$100-\$100,000! FAST! CONFIDENTIAL!** Glendale, Box 260279, Plano, TX 75026 - 1-800-444-6599.

## HOBBIES & COLLECTIONS

**AUTHENTIC SPACE SHUTTLE MEMORABILIA.** T-Shirts - Hats - Patches - Pins - Coins - Jackets and other collectibles relating to Shuttle Flights. Send for Catalog: Mr. Richard Sales, Box 630368, Dept. HQ, Miami, FL 33163.

## INVENTIONS WANTED

**INVENTORS!** Your first step is important. For FREE advice, call **ADVANCED PATENT SERVICES**, Washington, DC. 1-800-458-0352.

**FREE kit for inventors!** Call The Concept Network: \*Patenting \*Research \*Marketing. 1-800 835-2246 Ext. 197.

## JEWELRY

**CLOSEOUT JEWELRY.** 55¢ Dozen. 25¢ gets catalog. **ROUSSELS**, 107-910 Dow, Arlington, MA 02174-7199.

## LOANS BY MAIL

**MONEY PROBLEMS?** Write us. Immediate Loans and Outright Grants to individuals refused elsewhere. 98% eligible! Associates-D2, Box 9008, Baldwin, NY 11510-9008.

# Classified Continued

AH JANUARY/92

## LOANS BY MAIL—Cont'd

CASH GRANTS available from foundations! Never repay! 401 sources/application instructions — \$3.00. Fundsearch, Box 5730-SZ, Lighthouse Point, FL 33074.

## MAILING LISTS

ACTIVE NEW OPPORTUNIST NAMES! GUARANTEED! FAST DELIVERY! MIXED STATES! 200/\$12; 500/\$18; 1000/\$28. Dealer's Co-Op, Box 526-I, Griffith, IN 46319. 1-800-992-9405.

EAGER, RESPONSIVE MAILORDER BUYERS! Fresh! Guaranteed! MLM Opportunity Seekers. ONE HOUR DELIVERY VIA FAX! Sameday Mail. List International 1-800-69-LISTS. Visa/MC/AmEx/COD.

## MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing mail! Free Supplies, Postage! Bonuses! Start immediately! Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-DCM, Burnt Hills, NY 12027-0015.

EXCELLENT PAY writing at home. Men and women needed. Call Now! Amazing recorded message reveals details. X 305-480-4655.

READ "How To Write a Classified Ad That Pulls." Instructive booklet tells how to write an effective classified ad. Also includes certificate worth \$5.00 toward a classified ad in any of our publications. For your copy, send \$4.75 (includes postage) to Davis Publications, Inc., Dept. CL, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

GET FREE CASH! Private Money Grants. Foundation Giveaways. Millions available. Sources, Box 5529-N, Diamond Bar, CA 91765.

EARN \$500 weekly mailing letters. Easy, spare-time business. Write: Omega, Box 4309-N, West Covina, CA 91791.

## MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES—Cont'd

BIG Bucks stuffing envelopes. Free details, send name & address: 11 Graber Pl., Kitchener, Ont. N2A 1G7.

THIS is a First. Make them the star of their own personalized book or poster. You must see it to believe it. 32 laminated pages in full color. Her picture appears on 23 pages. Representatives wanted. Jeff Roberts Company, 299 Newport Avenue (S8), Wollaston, MA 02170. Enclose \$1.00 for H&M.

DO YOU WANT TO BE IN PICTURES? Movie companies are always looking for people, places and things. For more details send \$2.00 plus sase to: Capital D Corp., 140 State Hwy. 17, Paramus, NJ 07652. EARN BIG BUCKS!

FREE "Classifieds" aid. (Maximize your response/lower expenses!) Write: Brooks/NC3, Battle Ground, Washington 98604-0010.

CREATE PROFITABLE Information Booklets/Reports. OUTSTANDING Home-Based Business. (Free) SPECIAL Report. Main Street Publications, Box 1373-A, Roswell, Georgia 30077.

MAILORDER OPPORTUNITY: SELL MONEYMAKING REPORTS — MAKE 1000% PROFIT! FREE DETAILS. VENTURE-RI, BOX 336, RIVIERA, AZ 86442.

VENDING MACHINES. No selling. Routes earn amazing profits. 32-page Catalogue FREE. Parkway Corporation, 1930NO Greenspring Drive, Timonium, Maryland 21093.

NEW! GROW EXPENSIVE PLANTS. SELL FOR 2,000% PROFIT. FREE information. GROWBIZ, Box 306-I1, Seminary, MS 39479.

BUSINESS LOANS: Start-up and Venture Capital our specialty. No Collateral, Co-signers. Interviews. Write: Associates-DB, Box 9008, Baldwin, NY 11510-9008.

**YOU'LL MAKE  
MONEY**

**SAVE MONEY TOO—  
BY READING and ANSWERING  
THESE CLASSIFIED ADS**

# Classified Continued

4H JANUARY/92

## OF INTEREST TO ALL

FEEL the excitement of seeing your ideas and words in print. Free details: Marc Anthony and Associates, Dept. DC2, 4480 Lee Hts. Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio 44128.

## PERSONAL

PEARLS Of The Orient Want To Write You. Details, Photos FREE, VIDEOS AVAILABLE. (#1 In Service Since 1979.) PAL, Blanca, CO 81123-0051. (719) 379-3228.

SINGLE? Widowed? Divorced? Nationwide introductions! Refined, sincere people. 18-80. Identity, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage. Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948. (415) 897-2742.

BEAUTIFUL GIRLS SEEK FRIENDSHIP AND MARRIAGE. American — Mexican — Philippine—European. Photo selection FREE! Latins, Box 1716-DD, Chula Vista, CA 91912.

GOOD SINGLES with Christian values!! Local/Nationwide introductions! FREE magazine! Rush age, interest. Amber, Box 232, Deer Park, NY 11729.

RUSSIA-SCANDINAVIA-POLAND, etc: Worldwide correspondence between sincere professionals (since 1980), SCANNA, POB 4-IC, Pittsford, NY 14534. (716) 586-3170.

## PERSONAL—Cont'd

FREE Dating Service Offer! (18-88) (Nationwide) Details: Compatible-IO, Box 2592, Lakeland, FL 33806. (813) 499-5050.

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE. Write to Beautiful Soviet Ladies. Send \$2 PH for Photoad Directory, Box 921932, Norcross, Georgia 30092.

## RECIPES

CRIMINALLY-good gumbo, other unique recipes! Send long sase, \$5: Wells, Box 5084, Eureka, CA 95502.

COOKIN' - Fun Foods - \$4.25. Keep Clean Stand \$4.50. WCS, P.O. Box 1329, Rosenberg, TX 77471.

FRIENDSHIP cakes with starter. Delicious. Special. SASE, \$3.00. Jay's, 12802 Varrientos, San Antonio, TX 78233.

## SONGWRITERS

\$1,200.00 CASH PRIZE. Poems Wanted For New Songs - Recordings - Publishing. Broadway Music Promotions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 34278.

## TAPES & CASSETTES

OLDTIME radio programs. Mysteries, adventure, suspense, science fiction, comedies. Classic tapes. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm, New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

## For Greater Savings...Results...and Profits...

PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR SPECIAL COMBINATIONS:

Combo #1, Combo #2, or Combo #3.

Each combination is designed to give your ad the largest audience available.

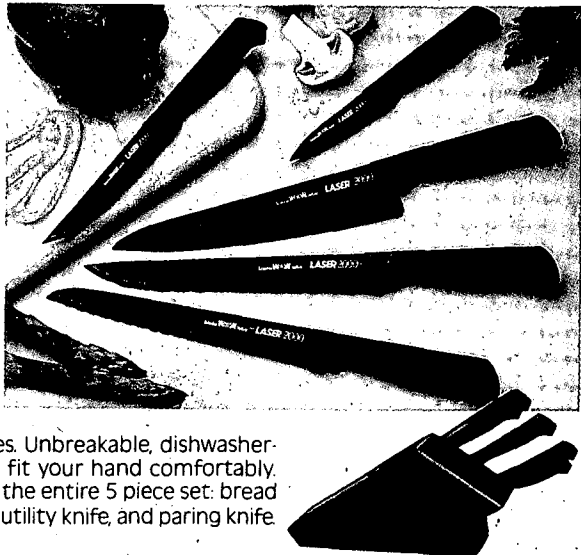
Each combination offers you a Special Discount Rate.

For further information write to I. M. Bozokl, Classified Ad Manager, Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

# MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

## ▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST

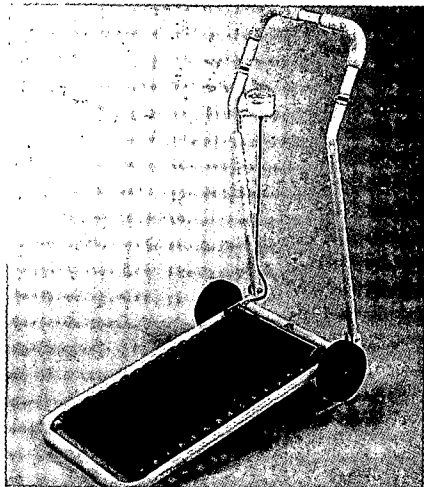
The secret behind Regent Scheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening! The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades. Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife, and paring knife.



**\$129.98** (\$7.00) #A1933.

## ▼ FOLDAWAY EXERTRACK™

Staying in shape is vital for our health and well being with today's lifestyle. Getting to the gym may not always be easy in our busy lives. We have just the answer for all you people on the go or just for the ones who enjoy to get fit at home. That's why the Foldaway Exertrack is the perfect way to exercise. This personal treadmill has a speedometer/odometer to monitor speed and progress. It measures 38"x21"x3" and features a safe rubber track and an adjustable handlebar that faces forward or backward for running and walking comfort. No electrical connections or motors needed. Exercise has never been simpler. Order one today and get on the right track with the Exertrack. Folds away for easy storage, lightweight and compact. At a great price!



**\$131.98** (\$15.00) #A1977.

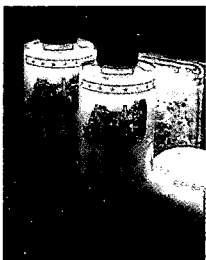
## ▼ EVERYTHING BAG

People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors. **\$24.98** (\$4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki; #A1957-Gray.

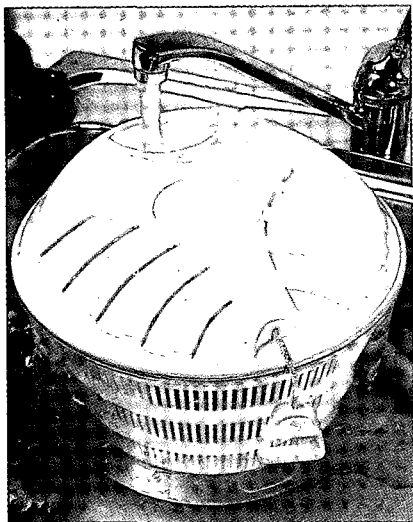


## ▼ FOOD FOR WOOD

Most of the convenience waxes you buy actually dry out wood instead of nourishing it. What's the alternative? Our choice is Williamsville Wax. It is made of beeswax and lemon oil, heat-blended with other natural oils. It can be used on any type of wood, any type of finish, on paneling or kitchen cabinets as well as fine furniture. Williamsville Wax is super for restoring neglected or mistreated wood. Two 8-oz. bottles cost **\$13.98** (\$3.25) #A14312.



## ▼ SPIN WASH, SPIN DRY



The Jet Spin Washer/Dryer for salad greens and vegetables, does a better job with less effort than any other method of preparation. As the stream of water hits the spinning inner basket, it bursts into spray, giving the contents a good drenching before being carried off by centrifugal action. Flywheel action keeps basket spinning with only a few gentle tugs. Spray wash coaxes dirt and grit from innermost lettuce wrinkles. Turn off the faucet and with a few more tugs the remaining water spins away, leaving you with crisp clean salad greens, so dry they are positively perky. Also works for fruits and vegetables. The Jet Salad Washer/Dryer is self-draining, splashfree. **\$19.98** (\$4.50) #A1520.

**TO ORDER:** Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 012 AH ; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc. © 1990  
1905 Swarthmore Ave., Lakewood, N.J. 08701



# MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

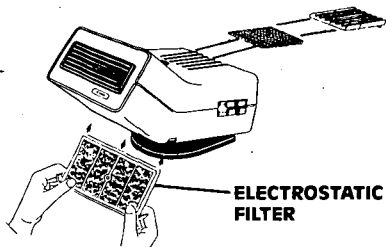
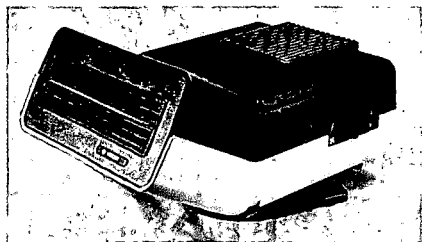
## ▼ BREATHE EASIER WITH THE AIR PROCESSOR

Clean air is vital to overall good health and general well-being and there is growing concern about the quality of the air around us. Amcor's Air Processor is uniquely designed to remove indoor air pollution and improve air quality. This compact unit has a high voltage generator that produces negatively charged ions that clean the air of cigarette/cigar smoke, dust, pollen, fungal and bacterial particles as well as a host of other allergy stimuli. The Air Processor also features a blower for air circulation and a unique filter that is permanent and washable. Includes a free ionoscope that detects the negative ions emitted from the ion generator and proves that it is functioning. Very quiet so it is perfect for any room in your house. UL listed. **\$99.98 (\$6.50) #A2002.**

## ▼ SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH SOUND SLEEPER



Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audilogic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state-of-the-art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! **\$89.98 (\$5.50) #A2000.**



**TO ORDER:** Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL** Dept. 012 AH ; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, NJ. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa, and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc. © 1991  
1905 Swarthmore Ave., Lakewood, NJ 08701

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED